

Gen. HOANG VAN THAI

HOW SOUTH VIETNAM WAS LIBERATED

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(Memoirs)

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Dear readers,

The great victory of spring 1975 brought to an end the long war of resistance of the Vietnamese people against US imperialist aggression.

In early 1966, soon after the first US units entered South Vietnam, I was assigned to go there and publicize the Resolution of the Party Central Committee's 12th plenary session among our combatants in the 5th Interzone and the Tay Nguyen front (Central Highlands). Then, by decision of the Politburo, I stayed back to join the leadership of the B1 Battlefield (5th Interzone). In October 1967 I was sent to B2 (South Vietnam proper) to join the others in the Central Military Department for South Vietnam and direct the battle there. After the signing of the Paris Agreement my comrades-in-arms and I from the B2 Battlezone went North to report on the situation and attend the 21st plenary session of the Central Committee. I stayed in the North and worked at the General Staff headquarters until the South was completely liberated.

On the 10th anniversary of the great spring victory, and to implement the Resolution of the Politburo on the organisation of celebrations for major anniversaries in 1984 and 1985, the People's Army Publishing House asked me to write these memoirs. I wish through this book to inform readers of some of the activities of the Politburo, Party Central Committee,

Central Military Committee and Strategic Staff Office of the Party during the last years of the war, 1973 to 1975. I hope this small book may help readers understand more clearly the strategic and military talents of our Party in the decisive stage of the war for national liberation.

The rapid development of the Party's war strategy and tactics over the years 1973 - 75 was one of the decisive factors leading to the great spring victory.

After the signing of the Paris Agreement, and faced with the scheming of the Americans and their Saigon agents blatantly sabotaging the Agreement, our Party objectively analyzed the situation and charted the correct path forward for the revolution in South Vietnam. Throughout 1973 and 1974, the Party led our army and people to resolutely foil the pacification and land-seizure strategies of the US and its puppets while resolutely creating a new posture and balance of forces more and more in our favour in the great rear base in the North through strengthening the strategic supply route and especially on the great frontline, South Vietnam. With a new posture and new force thus created to seize upon the strategic opportunity, when the dry season of 1974-1975 arrived, the Party, sensitive to new developments on the battlefield, affirmed that the strategic opportunity had arrived, and thus made the bold strategic decision to speed up the general offensive and widespread uprising over the whole battlefield of South Vietnam. In the spring of 1975, especially following the Buon Ma Thuot victory, in the common strategy which was evolving more and more in our favour the Party repeatedly complemented this strategic

decision aimed at winning the greatest victory within the shortest period of time. Fully understanding the determination of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, the leadership at all echelons and on various battlefronts, while conducting the fight to defeat more enemy forces and liberate more localities, concentrated our best forces and made extremely urgent preparations to strike the final strategic blow to liberate Saigon and the whole of South Vietnam. Under the clear-sighted leadership of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, all localities and battlefields and units gave full play to their initiative and creativity, rushed forward on the impetus of new victories and acted in unison under the motto "swiftness, boldness, temerity, surprise and certain victory". With the all-out mobilization of the entire nation's material and manpower resources and with the three strategic battles (to liberate the Central Highlands, Hue-Danang and finally Saigon and the Mekong River delta) our army and people fulfilled with flying colours the two-year strategic plan within only two months and won total victory in the war, liberated the South and reunified the country.

In view of limitations on my knowledge and time and also because I want to focus on the activities of the High Command in the final stages of the war, this book can only deal in the most general way with the operations of the various battlefronts and other activities throughout the country.

I sincerely thank the various offices involved in summing up the lessons learned from the war and in research at central level, the 5th Interzone, the Military History Sub-Institute in the South and many other comrades who supplied

me with documents and made very valuable suggestions to me in my compilation of this book.

Also in view of these limitations and the overwhelming nature of the topic, despite my best efforts, omissions and mistakes may be inevitable. I sincerely hope our readers will be able to correct any such mistakes and point out any omissions.

January 31, 1985

Hoang Van Thai

CHAPTER I

THE GUNS HAD NOT YET FALLEN SILENT

An atmosphere of urgency and tension prevailed at the offices of the Central Military Department and the Southern Military Command in the last months of 1972.

We in B2 ⁽¹⁾ regularly received communiques and instructions from the Politburo, Central Military Committee and from Le Duc Tho ⁽²⁾ and Xuan Thuy in Paris keeping us abreast of each new development in the diplomatic struggle between us and the enemy .

We and the United States had concurred that the Agreement already reached by the two sides would be initialled on October 31, 1972.

The Politburo also instructed us on how to organize the quadripartite and bilateral joint military commissions, and informed us about the role of the International Supervision and Control Commission, and on the National Council for Reconciliation and Concord comprising three equal parties. We also received instructions on how to make the necessary preparations for implementing the Agreement.

As is known to all, the US side later did an about-face and refused to initial the agreement at the scheduled time. After Richard Nixon was re-elected for another term, the US demanded modification of many essential points in the Agreement already reached by the two sides. For instance, they demanded the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops.

It was obvious that we would have to intensify our military activities in the spirit of the message sent to us by Le Duan ⁽³⁾ in August, not only to back up the Paris talks but also to create an advantageous position for us in the event of the Agreement being signed.

In his telegram to the Central Military Department and the Southern Military Command dated November 8, 1972, Vo Nguyen Giap ⁽⁴⁾ noted that there were two possibilities being anticipated by the Politburo - the war might continue for a few years or be concluded within a relatively short period - and we had to stand prepared for both eventualities.

They concluded that the United States would, sooner or later, have to sign the Agreement, and in that context, the most complicated issues would be the ceasefire, delimitation of zones under the control of each party, modalities for the stationing of troops and so on. The message also raised some specific issues on which we had to give our opinions before submitting them to the Politburo and the Central Party Committee for consideration.

In late November 1972, through the developments on the battlefield and communiques from the General Staff, it became clearer and clearer to us that over the past two months the United States had been making the most of the time left to boost the strength of the Saigon army through massive introduction of weapons and war materiel into South Vietnam.

They had provided increasing support for the Saigon troops in the latter's land-seizure and terrorist campaigns in an attempt to improve the position of the Saigon regime. The US obviously had no alternative other than to pull out of South Vietnam, but it wanted to conclude the war in a strong position and with its agents in a more stable situation.

A few days later, the Politburo reaffirmed that the United States was continuing its involvement in a new form by boosting the strength of the puppet army in order to ensure an advantageous position for them in comparison with ours while weakening our forces. In fact, even before we and the US government had finally concurred on the text of the Agreement, the US was already using the Nguyen Van Thieu administration to sabotage it.

On November 27, 1972 the Central Military Committee informed us that it was very likely the enemy would resume their bombing of the North at an even more intensive level, including the use of B52 strategic bombers for massive attacks against Hanoi and Haiphong. A week later, the Politburo instructed us to make every necessary preparation to cope with the eventuality of a resumption of bombing over the whole of North Vietnam and suspension of the Paris peace talks. We received news of Le Duc Tho's return to Hanoi almost at the same time as a report of US B52 attacks on the North.

To tell the truth, although we had not the least doubt about our eventual victory we could not figure out how our army and people in the North would react to the enemy's strategic air offensive. We assigned some of our comrades in the education and training department to monitoring *Voice of Vietnam* to see how our anti-aircraft and air force units were fighting back against the enemy's strategic bombers.

In the first two days of the air strikes (December 18 and 19) we felt that something had gone wrong with Hanoi radio. I had had the same premonition exactly 25 years earlier in late 1947, when 20,000 French troops attacked our resistance base in the Viet Bac where *Voice of Vietnam* was located. I remembered that a few days earlier the General Staff had

received instructions from President Ho Chi Minh to ensure the safety of the national radio station at any cost, to see that it would not be interrupted even for a minute. Our soldiers and workers had lived up to their oath to the President; the enemy's military offensive was completely defeated and the *Voice of Vietnam* emerged unscathed.

Now, during those memorable moments of the last days of 1972, we felt great relief when over the radio came the familiar and distinctive voice of the announcer : " This is the *Voice of Vietnam*, broadcasting from Hanoi, capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam". On December 18, 1972 the radio reported that eight enemy planes had been shot down over the skies of North Vietnam, including three B52s, and seven pilots had been captured. It filled our hearts with pride.

An unusually enthusiastic atmosphere prevailed at the headquarters of the Southern Military Command. The much-vaunted stratofortresses of the US Air Force had been given well-deserved punishment right on the first few days of their incursion into our nation's northern skies. The so-called "absolute superiority" of the US Air Force was satirized and ridiculed in many cartoons and articles in local wall newspapers.

A few days later, Associated Press admitted that " the number of American pilots lost in just five days (from December 18 to 22, 1972) accounts for 13 per cent of the number of pilots now in detention camps in North Vietnam ". Reuters wrote: "Military observers in Washington estimate that at this rate, the US might run out of B52s within three months".

Then the US began to tone down its offensive. Nixon ordered the suspension of bombing, shelling, and mine-laying and blockading of the seas off Vietnam from the 20th

parallel northward. Kissinger returned to Paris to resume the talks; in other words, an admission by the US of failure in its attempt to exert maximum pressure on Vietnam.

The struggle on the diplomatic front, however, remained anything but simple. After a private meeting with Kissinger, and after the two sides had basically concurred on the draft Agreement to be signed on January 23, 1973, Le Duc Tho sent a message to Pham Hung and the Central Military Department raising three major issues to be addressed in the implementation of the agreement in the South:

1. On the military front, the Saigon regime would undoubtedly demand the " withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops".

2. On the political front, there was the question of the formation of the National Council for Reconciliation and Concord.

3. The mutual release of persons detained by both sides. We held an immediate meeting to exchange views on these issues.

Over the remaining months of that year, by decision of the Central Military Department, a group including Nguyen Huy Tho, Huynh Tan Phat, Tran Buu Kiem and myself, together with some assistants, began preparing for the setting up of the National Council for Reconciliation and Concord, for participation in a tripartite coalition government according to the draft agreement reached between us and the US, and also for choosing those personalities from the Third Party who might co-operate with us in that coalition government. We also went into the details of reorganizing our administrative system from the top down with a view to

preserving and developing the strength of the revolution in the future administration and in mass organizations, and on how to continue building up our armed forces and win over the middle strata and progressives in order to change the balance of forces in our favour.

Even before the Agreement was signed, and over the following months, we remained firmly committed to a policy of forming a tripartite coalition government in South Vietnam after the American pullout. Reports on Chou En Lai's visit to Vietnam showed that China did not back us in the negotiation nor in the signing of an agreement with the United States or the setting up of a coalition government.

With regard to the setting up of a joint military commission, the Central Military Department had already discussed this and presented its views to the Politburo. On January 9, 1973, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Foreign Minister and member of the Politburo, sent a message saying that in view of the difficult and complex struggle that lay ahead the Politburo suggested the Central Military Department should appoint Major General Tran Van Tra, then deputy commander of the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces, to head the South Vietnam delegation in the quadripartite joint military commission. It also proposed that when the bilateral joint military commission was established he would also represent the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces on that commission. He would be assisted by the two deputy heads of our delegation in Paris who would return direct to South Vietnam. Preparations on all fronts had to start in earnest because the final meeting with the US was only a few weeks off, i.e. January 28, 1973 and we knew only too well what our adversaries were up to across the negotiating table.

In the light of the Politburo directive and of many debates within the Central Military Department for the South, we agreed that in the immediate future the essential task was to end US involvement and ensure that all troops from the US and its allies were withdrawn from South Vietnam. This would be a basis on which to take the revolution in South Vietnam one step forward.

As concluded in the draft agreement between us and the United States there would exist in the South two administrations, two armies and two zones of control. The enemy's strong points consisted in their still controlling the towns and strategic routes and in the continued US effort to prop up the Thieu administration in order to carry out its neo-colonialist policy. We controlled the mountainous areas and many vital areas of the countryside. We had a broad political base among the people and quite a strong army stationed in many areas. However, the population of the liberated zones was limited and the armed forces had not developed evenly across different areas. While in some areas like the Mekong delta our political and armed forces were relatively strong and had moved close to enemy positions even before the signing of the Agreement, in many other areas our armed forces remained weaker than the enemy's. Many of our army units which had gone through an uninterrupted period of war during 1972 had not been revitalised in terms of manpower and equipment nor had they been strengthened organizationally. This balance of forces presaged many difficulties and complexities in the fight ahead despite our many advantages.

We fully shared the view expressed by Le Duc Tho in his message from Paris on January 17 that we should remain prepared to cope with a resumption of war due to enemy

provocation in certain areas. He also warned against the possibility of escalation. So along with political, diplomatic and legal battles, we had to gain time in order to build up and strengthen our forces, especially the armed forces in resistance bases and liberated zones, to fight effectively in the event of a resumption of hostilities. In the immediate future, the enemy might use greater force to extend the areas under their control to gain the advantage before the Agreement was signed. It was therefore of vital importance to remain combat-ready, and if necessary hit back at the enemy, defend our positions, the resistance bases and liberated zones as well as speedily build up our technical and logistical bases. This policy had to be fully understood at all levels right down to the grassroots.

Thank to careful preparations for the implementation of the General Staff's "opportunity strategy" in the last days of January 1973 before the signing of the Paris Agreement, the Central Military Department and the Southern Military Command had successfully directed the various battlefields to over-run or force the withdrawal or surrender of hundreds of enemy military posts and seize control of hundreds of hamlets in a number of areas, thus extending the liberated zones in many vital areas, cutting off and or seizing control of many sections of highly strategic routes and cutting more deeply into enemy lines.

The news of the signing of the Paris Agreement brought immense joy to all officials and personnel at the Central Military Department⁽⁶⁾ and the Southern Military Command in late January and early February 1973. The United States had committed itself to withdrawing all of its troops from South Vietnam. For the first time in 100 years our country would thus be free of foreign invaders. This big news coin-

cided with the arrival of the Lunar New Year, of a new spring when our people could celebrate Tet before sending the delegation headed by Tran Van Tra⁽⁷⁾ off to a new battle.

Reports from various quarters showed that the signing of the Paris Agreement had thrown the Saigon army and administration into utter disarray. In fact, faced with failure in its aggressive war against Vietnam, the US had overridden its henchmen and signed with us an agreement against the latter's will.

In many localities where revolutionary forces prevailed, enemy troops showed bewilderment and loss of morale. Relying on the terms of the Paris Agreement, we stepped up the political struggle and the campaign of persuasion among enemy troops. The Saigon puppets were most disheartened by the fact that the US had failed to "force us to pull North Vietnamese troops out of the South". Accordingly, after the American pull-out, the Saigon army had to confront our army alone on the battlefield in the "leopard skin" battle formation which Nguyen Van Thieu most dreaded.

But the US and Saigon temporarily put aside their differences in order together to carry out a ploy – to sign with one hand and sabotage with the other. On orders from its US overlords, the Thieu regime began to implement a plan which had long been in preparation codenamed "Ly Thuong Kiet 1973", sending in troops to carry out a strategy of overrunning territory.

In B2, the enemy focused their attacks on the Mekong delta and provinces around Saigon. From late January to early March 1973 in the delta, the enemy divided their regular army into small units to collaborate with the "civil guard" and self-defence forces in implementing a strategy of land-seizure and planting the puppet flag in many areas. The

struggle against the enemy was particularly bitter in Cai Lay and Cai Be (My Tho province), Tan Chau and Hong Ngu (Kien Phong province), Chau Doc, Chuong Thien, Phong Dinh, and Ba Xuyen in the western part of South Vietnam. In the east, we fought for every inch of land in Long An, Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa provinces. The enemy's main force units with air support tried to dislodge us from Phuoc Vinh, Dong Xoai and Loc Tan in Binh Long province and Xa Mat in Tay Ninh province, and sent their commandos and civil guard to occupy Bu Prang and the Tuy Duc Cao roads in an attempt to cut our supply lines. In the 6th Zone, enemy infantry units backed by tanks, artillery and air support attacked our positions in Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan, Binh Tuy, Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc provinces. They carried out intense air raids on the contested areas in an attempt to check our advance and break our encirclement. In just over a month following the signing of the Paris Agreement the enemy had made deep inroads into many areas under our control, especially in the vicinity of towns and villages along major routes. All told, they reoccupied almost all the 394 hamlets which had been liberated by us before the signing took place.

On our side, after the Agreement took effect, we left many loopholes in our political, ideological and organizational work despite anticipating that the enemy would sabotage the implementation of the Agreement. The general tendency was one of confidence in the practicability of the Agreement, in the role of the International Supervision and Control Commission and the Joint Military Commission, and in the possibility of setting up a council for national reconciliation and concord and a tripartite coalition government. However, the reality was that due to overt enemy sabotage of

the Agreement from the outset, the guns had not yet fallen silent on the battlefield.

In the 8th Zone alone, between January and March 1973 the enemy reoccupied 24 communes and 120 hamlets and set up 287 new military posts. They basically recaptured the areas liberated by us shortly before the signing of the Paris Agreement and even encroached on several formerly liberated zones. The situation began to improve only after instructions from the Central Military Department to the effect that from April 1973 we should move in a different direction.

The same belief in the possibility of peace and relaxation of vigilance could also be observed in the 9th Zone before and after the signing of the Agreement. This was checked in time by the zone's Party Committee. Less than one week after the Agreement took effect on February 3, the Regional Standing Committee convened an expanded meeting. The meeting hailed the great success represented by the Paris Agreement. The people were enthusiastic and revolutionary zeal reached new heights as the morale of the puppet army plummeted. This, the meeting decided, might be the right time to launch a three-pronged offensive⁽⁹⁾. The meeting made the following assessment: the enemy would undoubtedly step up sabotage of the Agreement and the first thing would be to continue with the pacification and land-seizure campaign. They would launch counter-offensives to recapture places lost after January 27, particularly where we were off guard. At the same time they would resort to fascist methods to prevent any popular uprising. The meeting unanimously pledged to the Central Military Department an assurance that it would retain an offensive posture, hit back resolutely at the enemy's land seizure and pacification tactics, and expand the political struggle and the campaign of

persuasion among enemy troops aimed at preserving revolutionary gains and taking the movement forward. This line was to be followed until the enemy was forced to implement the Agreement, especially the provisions regarding a ceasefire and guarantees of democratic rights for the people. Then we would shift the emphasis of our struggle to the political arena and persuasion among enemy troops.

On the military front, we would act in a way appropriate to the situation. The meeting decided that our attack strategy should consist of striking at the enemy in such a way as to prevent them from denouncing us, win the sympathy of the majority of the enemy rank and file and the support of the people, and isolate repressive officers and officials in the enemy forces and administration. We should continue our military attacks in order to bolster the political struggle among the people and the conversion of enemy troops and win more people over to our side. We also had to hit the enemy hard without, however, affecting our position on the diplomatic front. The main targets of our attacks were contested areas, those still under enemy control and densely-populated and wealthy areas, step by step transforming contested areas into liberated areas and areas under enemy control into contested ones.

In short, the most important lesson learned by the 9th Zone in the area of leadership was to firmly grasp the concepts of violence and offensive, to take the initiative in counter-attacking and to attack the enemy in order to safeguard the achievements of the revolution.

After working together for a time with Nguyen Huu Tho, Huynh Tan Phat and Tran Buu Kiem⁽¹⁰⁾, during which we concentrated on organization of the administrative apparatus starting on January 20, 1973, I returned to military

duties. I was assigned by the Central Military Department to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam where military affairs were being directed by Tran Van Tra, deputy liberation forces commander, and Tran Do, deputy political commissar. Tran Van Tra was then busy making preparations to take up his post at the joint military commission. On January 28, 1973 he was present at Tan Son Nhut airbase as head of the military delegation of the southern front.

While closely following the situation, studying the guidelines issued by the Politburo on guidelines and tactics for the struggle, and listening to the experiences of the 8th and 9th Zones as well as to communiques from higher-up on the situation on the 5th and Tay Nguyen battlefronts, we actively prepared for a meeting of the Standing Office of the Central Military Department scheduled for mid-March. We had our hands full during those early days of 1973. How to implement the opportunity strategy in order to make further gains before a political settlement was reached, how to monitor developments on the battlefield, draw accurate conclusions and set a correct course for further action, how to move the leadership offices nearer to the frontline in order to provide prompt guidance for localities in the political struggle, how to handle the return of enemy POWs and receive our men returning from enemy camps and so on; everything had to be done with the greatest urgency.

On February 27, one month after the Agreement was signed, we completed an overview of the situation and a report to the Politburo and Central Military Committee.

We also reached unanimity within the Standing Office of the Central Military Department on directions for the leadership of the localities with regard to guidelines and tactics for the struggle and on the dissemination of information

on experiences in countering enemy pacification and land-seizure operations in order to defend the people and consolidate and develop the revolutionary forces.

Directive 02 from the Central Military Department summed up discussions and served as a basis for the localities to decide on tactics in the struggle in this new environment.

I reported on the contents of the said directive to a military conference held on March 2, 1973 at Bu Dop, attended by the military commanders to every province and district in the region. The directive affirmed the historic significance of the victory of our nation after nearly 20 years of resistance against US aggression. It also highlighted the new strategy adopted by the US and its Saigon henchmen and the features and possibilities for development of the situation, and laid down policies, guidelines and tactics for the struggle in this new situation.

The most hotly debated issues at this military conference were those of how to use the armed forces most effectively and at the right level, given our determination to preserve and consolidate peace while the enemy were overtly sabotaging the Paris Agreement, and how to combine political, armed and legal struggle in order to develop our full strength and maintain our offensive posture in the new environment. The conference pointed to the need to combat two contrasting tendencies: either to carry on the fight as if no agreement had been reached, or to make ourselves hostage to the Agreement by refusing to fight back even it attacked.

On March 7, 1973 no sooner had I returned from Bu Dop to the Southern Military Command when a telegram came instructing me to attend a meeting in Hanoi. This greatly pleased me as I had so many things to discuss with

others on the CPV Central Committee after more than a month of implementing the Paris Agreement – so many new problems posed by the enemy's increasingly blatant sabotage of the Agreement.

I would thus return to the North after four years. I was in reasonably good health, having had only a few malaria attacks and relatively stable blood pressure during 1972.

We had little time for preparation. A meeting was convened of the various offices of the Southern Military Command to review the military situation during 1972 and discuss a future plan of action.

An expanded meeting of the Standing Office of the Central Military Department was held on March 16 and 17 on the eve of our departure. After adopting the review report for 1972 we spent most of the remaining time evaluating the situation and determining directions for future action and drafting a report to the Politburo.

Our greatest concern was correctly evaluating the balance of forces on the battlefield. The United States and its satellites had withdrawn from South Vietnam but the Saigon army remained a large one capable of controlling a large segment of the population. They continued to receive aid, both military and economic, from the United States. In fact, the Saigon troops showed a conciliatory attitude wherever our forces were strong but intensified their land-seizure operations whenever we were weak or relaxed our vigilance.

The central issue at the meeting was determining directions for the development of the revolution in South Vietnam. Would the enemy accept the formation of a tripartite coalition government or would they continue to undermine the Agreement?

Two tendencies had been apparent in the people's consciousness over the past few months – either overconfidence in the workability of the Agreement which led to a relaxation of vigilance and loss of territory, or failure to understand the full significance of the Agreement and thus failure to rely on its contents in adopting forms and tactics for the struggle appropriate to each locality and for each point in time.

We saw the need to help the localities swiftly overcome these differing tendencies and strengthen their determination to use all forms of struggle to preserve and develop the gains brought about by the Agreement and at the same time resolutely fight back against enemy land-seizure operations. We also saw the need to help the localities and units make a correct assessment of the general situation and the specific situation in each locality and correctly predict and evaluate the enemy's new strategy and tactics, and their weaknesses and ours in order to adopt appropriate forms of struggle while continually strengthening and developing our forces, consolidating the liberated zones, revitalising our army in terms of manpower and equipment, and ensuring the combat-readiness of our armed forces in any eventuality.

At the end of the conference, Pham Hung summed up the discussions and drew the following conclusions: one, in the immediate future, it was necessary to make the localities understand the situation more clearly in order to swiftly change over to appropriate forms of struggle combining the military and political struggle with persuasion among enemy troops and the legal struggle in order to change the situation in our favour; and two, in the long term, there were two possibilities – either the enemy would have to comply with the Agreement and thus a tripartite coalition government would be formed or the enemy would intensify their sabotage of the

Agreement and the war would escalate. We thus had to be well prepared politically, ideologically and organisationally in order to seize the initiative in either case.

The formal meeting of the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee ended on the afternoon of March 17. But we stayed together until late at night. We were joined by others who had not attended the meeting. We had a heart-to-heart talk, not just on political and military issues.

The evolving situation was very complex and there were growing signs that the war would escalate. For our part, we were determined to preserve the achievements of the revolution after nearly 20 years of resistance against the US and to achieve final victory. As for the enemy, they were persisting in their strategy of "Vietnamising" the war and trying by all means possible to keep South Vietnam in the neo-colonialist sphere of influence of the United States. A decisive life-and-death struggle between revolution and counter-revolution was inevitable. This was also the scenario we had in mind for the forthcoming briefing to the Central Committee and Politburo and also what we had urged the localities in South Vietnam to do in the days and months ahead.

Our delegation to the meeting with the Central Committee this time comprised Nguyen Van Linh, deputy secretary of the Central Military Department in charge of the Saigon-Gia Dinh area, Vo Van Kiet, secretary of the Party Committee for the 9th Zone, Tran Nam Trung, in charge of the provinces of eastern Nam Bo, Nguyen Minh Duong, Party secretary for the 8th Zone, and myself, deputy secretary of the Central Military Department and B2 commander. The meeting convened by the Politburo would thus be attended by all the key representatives from South-Vietnam.

We had to take a detour via Cambodia to reach North Vietnam. We left on the evening of March 18, 1973 and the following day reached Kratie, the last liaison point for the Truong Son army's Division 470. The following day, we reached military post 53 in southern Stung Treng⁽¹²⁾.

We were met by At and Tuyet, the station commanders, who told us they had received instructions from the Politburo and Dong Si Nguyen⁽¹³⁾ to ensure the safety of the B2 delegation en route to the North. Following the signing of the Paris Agreement, the US continued its air raids against our strategic supply route from Kratie to the Lao border. We enquired as to the organisation of transportation. We were glad that this was continuing to arrive without major problems. We were also told that a contingent of several thousand troops would come from the North to reinforce the B2 battlefield.

We were glad not only because the increasing flow of supplies meant our men on the front were adequately fed and equipped but also because we could detect a new strategy from higher up for this new situation.

For several days now enemy aircraft had been intensifying their operations along the Mekong River and Highway 13 on Cambodian soil, especially at the junction of the Sekhong and Serepok Rivers near Stung Streng. We had to stay two nights on this side of the river because the air raids prevented our men from throwing a pontoon bridge across. We were accommodated in quite a spacious underground shelter built by our military engineers some three kilometres from the landing stage. I decided to spend this period of waiting writing a military report. As early as March 1973 the High Command had urged us to send in reports about the military situation, including information about the Nguyen Hue military campaign⁽¹⁴⁾, but we had not yet had time to do it.

Not until the night of March 22 could we cross the river. But from then on the enemy continued to launch night-time raids against moving targets, placing great strain on our drivers.

On the night of March 23 we arrived at Ta Ngau, close to the Lao-Cambodian border where the headquarters of Division 470 was located.

The division's task was to ensure the flow of military supplies from southern Saravane to Phi Ha. From there the supplies were rerouted to several destinations – to B2 and B3 (Central Highlands) via Ta Xeng including both southern and northern fronts in the Central Highlands. We met Colonel Nguyen Lang, commander of Division 470 and several other old comrades-in-arms. They reported to us with excitement that the supply and back-up forces had been considerably strengthened compared with several years earlier, and this applied not only to the land transport army, but also amphibious transport and communications, anti-aircraft and engineering units. After the signing of the Paris Agreement enemy raids had also significantly declined on the road from Laos to the north, enabling our men to grow food crops to improve their diet. In fact all the soldiers I met looked healthy and well-fed.

Nguyen Lang arranged for me to talk with the officers at division staff headquarters. On behalf of all the officers and men on the South Vietnam battlefield I expressed sincere thanks to the transport units and all those working on the strategic North-South route who had shed so much blood and endured so many hardships in order to maintain the combat strength of our army in South Vietnam. I described for them how this road had looked seven years earlier when I had travelled from Hanoi to the Central Highlands on a

mission of inspection. From a small forest track accessible only to people on foot, bicycles and pack-horses, the Truong Son route had now become a proper road and the lifeline joining the great rear base, the North, to the great front-line, the South, and even to the Cambodian liberation army. After portraying a general picture of the battle situation several months after the signing of the Paris Agreement and pointing to the strategy and tactics being employed by the enemy, I urged them to continue their efforts to safeguard the supply route which was now more crucial than at any previous time. I also drew their attention to the need to keep losses in terms of men and supplies at the lowest possible level during the transport campaign.

The following day (March 24), we arrived at station 37 at the Phi Ha crossroads. This was known as a "strategic crossroads" in terms of transportation, not just because it lay near Ta Xeng (the meeting point of the borders of the three countries of Indochina) but because it was there that the transport route branched off, heading southwestward to B2 and eastwards to B3. I remembered that in 1966 during my trip to the Central Highlands, I had stopped at this road junction which was then a dense forest. There I met an army medical team headed by Vu Van Can, head of the Army Medical Department, sent by the Central Military Committee of the Party to study ways of fighting malaria, which posed a deadly threat to our men in the Central Highlands. Now, as I stood looking around, I saw only a stretch of open territory where most of the trees had been destroyed by American bombs and defoliants.

From Phi Ha, we did not take the road via the Bac river-landing but followed a new road crossing the Sekhong River and heading northwards to Saravane. Since this road

had better cover and was raided less frequently by enemy planes our vehicles could move during daylight.

We crossed the Sekhong River late on March 24. On the other bank I met some Lao comrades from the provincial Party Committee of Attapeu. They were all very optimistic about the situation. Some of them spoke Vietnamese quite fluently. They told me that after Attapeu was liberated, the revolutionary administration had continued to strengthen, but that the reactionaries had remained strong especially on the Bolovens Plateau. Needless to say, I felt very enthusiastic meeting them on the Truong Son route, a strategic road that symbolically joined together the three nations on the Indochinese peninsula.

We continued our journey and arrived at the Senoi supply station at the northern foot of the Bolovens Plateau on the night of March 25. Careful preparations had been made here to welcome Prince Sihanouk's delegation on its way to visit the liberated zones of Cambodia from North Vietnam following the signing of the Paris Agreement.

Senoi was now the base camp for a road construction unit from the People's Army of Vietnam. It consisted of a group of wooden houses built on a high hill and nestling under tall trees. The houses were thatched with palm leaves and had bamboo walls. The base was supplied with an electric generator.

We decided to spend a day there after a week of arduous travel. A few crack shots from the encampment returned with a stag which provided us with a copious meal after days of privation. The informal exchange of views among B2 officers which had begun several days earlier now resumed in groups of two or three. The battle situation, future tasks, proposals to be put to the CPV Central Committee – all this dominated our thoughts day and night.

The first question to be addressed was that of how to describe the actual situation in South Vietnam. Was there peace or war? Obviously there was no longer a war as had been fought in the past but neither had the guns fallen silent on the battlefield. An accurate assessment of the situation would be crucial in order to adopt the right proposals for submission to the important forthcoming meeting of the Politburo.

At a meeting on the morning 26 March, Vo Van Kiet and Nguyen Minh Duong provided more information about the situation in the Mekong River delta, especially enemy strategies in the 4th Tactical Zone.

Studying a large military map, we discussed the situation in the 4th Tactical Zone. There, taking advantage of their stronger forces (the ratio was five to one in their favour in some places) the enemy was trying to implement a policy which Vo Van Kiet called the "three preventions" strategy – preventing the population from rising up, preventing the puppet administration from collapsing and preventing the puppet army from disintegrating. As early as March we had already been informed of the enemy's pacification strategy in the 4th Tactical Zone during 1973, aimed at achieving the following: one, re-occupying 85 per cent of the land; two, putting 95 per cent of the population under their control; and three, restoring the situation to that existing before March 1972. They hoped to implement this strategy over a period of about one year, i.e. by the end of February 1974. The strategy would be in three stages. First, from March to May 1973, they would carry out pacification and land-seizure operations in Chuong Thien province. Second, from June to September, they would take on the U Minh area and finally, from October 1973 to February 1974, pacify Ca Mau and consolidate their hold on the newly-occupied areas.

Of these areas, Chuong Thien was the prime target, comprising the districts of Vinh Thuan, Go Cao, and parts of Giong Rieng (Rach Gia), and Long My (now Can Tho) and Ngang Dua (also called Kien Thien, in Bac Lieu province). This was a highly strategic region lying in the middle of the Hau River basin. The enemy hoped to use this area as a springboard for attacks on the U Minh resistance base and for controlling and defending the city of Can Tho which they referred to as the "western capital" of the Mekong delta.

We anticipated that the enemy would concentrate a large force including technical support units for a land-seizure attack on Chuong Thien, then push southwards to U Minh and finally to Ca Mau.

Meanwhile, the army and people of the 9th Zone had received instructions from the Central Military Department to prepare for such a move by the enemy and defeat the strategy of recapturing lost positions in the Mekong delta.

From the discussions it became clear to us that the enemy was about to carry out a very unpleasant strategy and that putting into effect our first option would be a very tough and complicated task.

While we were keen to see the agreement implemented, the enemy were determined to violate it more and more brazenly.

Was it inevitable that the war would escalate?

That evening I took a stroll in order to inspect the section of road over which I had passed in 1966 on my way to the Central Highlands and the 5th Military Zone. I recalled that in those days this strategic route had come only as far as the lower reaches of the Bac River, and our army engineers had toiled day and night to extend it southwards under the command of Nguyen Van Nhan.

The road was then only a small dirt track hidden under high trees, yet enemy aircraft had spotted it and bombed it day and night.

I noted that our engineers and members of the Young Volunteer Force were working under much harder conditions than during the anti-French war of resistance when we built a road through the northwest to Dien Bien Phu. Privations aside, they were plagued by malaria and had to work under great strain caused by frequent bombing and machine-gun fire from enemy aircraft. As I stood watching them working I felt proud of our young men who were literally living up to the slogan "Let us carve up the Truong Son mountain range and go on to save the country". The more I reflected on the slogan the more tangible a significance it assumed in my consciousness.

The once luxuriant groves of wild bananas on the roadside had been gradually stripped of their foliage as many of our army units, running out of supplies, had had to eat young banana shoots instead of rice. More than a few were struck down by fever and could not continue their march. A young guard from our team, a very strong sturdy fellow, also had to stay back after suffering an attack of malaria.

The supply route from Loc Ninh northwards had changed beyond recognition due to far more intense raids by enemy planes. The enemy were using all types of aircraft from their arsenal, including B52 bombers, all kinds of explosives including incendiary bombs, and a multitude of devices to detect and hamper our advance, such as anti-personnel pellet bombs and mines, defoliants and the so-called "tropical tree", an ultra-sensitive electronic detector dropped on the forest floor to monitor our movements.

The road continued to widen. As well as the trunk road,

many more detours and lateral link-ups had been built by our sappers. Now the trucks could go both ways, the southbound ones carrying supplies and troops and northbound ones carrying wounded soldiers. Fuel supply tanks had been installed on the roadside. The pipelines had reached Ban Phon in the southern part of Saravane province in Laos.

The road already linked the great rear base and the great southern front. Through their sweat and blood, the army and people in both North and South Vietnam, assisted by the fraternal peoples of Laos and Cambodia, had overcome the worst privations and dangers to build a road network known to the enemy and to the entire world as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the trail that would ultimately lead the revolutionary army to the last enemy hide-out in Saigon. The legendary Truong Son route will live for ever in the nation's history.

On 27 March we resumed our journey and later stopped at the headquarters of Division 471 hidden in a sparse but sheltering forest in the southern part of Muong Noong district. The houses stood beside a small slow-moving stream. That night we watched a film of the *cheo* opera *Tran quoc Toan and His Army*.

From now on the trip would be safer, enabling us to travel by day more often.

On the afternoon of 28 March we arrived at K94, a military post belonging to Division 471, which had received the government delegation headed by Mr Sihanouk the previous month. Here we met Dang Tinh, political officer of Army 559 who also had just arrived from North Vietnam. He was assigned to the Truong Son route after the signing of the Paris Agreement. Dang Tinh and I were old friends. During the anti-French resistance he was assigned to the resistance base on the left bank of the Red River, then to the Combat Operations Service.

Before joining the Truong Son army he had been political officer of the anti-aircraft defence service and air force.

A very optimistic and dynamic person who cared a lot about the rank and file, and one who knew how to use collective strength to overcome difficulties and accomplish tasks, he was loved by everyone for his open-mindedness and joviality. He was fond of poetry and music.

Truck drivers on the Truong Son route used to recite his poems. I still remember the following one entitled "Dust-covered":

*"Hail the columns of intrepid fighters
Driving trucks on the Truong Son route
They are young but their heads white
With so much dust collected on the road
Hurrah to the throngs of bicycles
Covered with camouflage foliage
The green foliage of Truong Son
Yet, why are their heads "white?"*

He talked to me about the situation in the North, on the battle against the American bombing blitz on Hanoi, and the situation along the road from North to South.

I had not expected that would be our last meeting. But a few days later as we returned to Hanoi, we heard that his car had struck a mine on Route 23 leading to Saravane, and Dang Tinh had been fatally wounded. A helicopter took his body straight to Hanoi. I had stood before his coffin unable to hold back my tears.

On 29 March we started from K94 and continued our trip northwards. The newly-built road was very wide, especially the section between Muong Noon and Ban Dong on Highway 9. In places where only one truck had been able to pass with great difficulty, now there was a road wide enough to accommodate three trucks at the same time.

On our way from Ban Dong to Lao Bao we stopped every now and then to listen to the guides recounting tales of our army's counter-offensive against the Lam Son 719 military campaign conducted by more than 70 battalions of US and Saigon forces in the spring of 1971. Before the campaign was launched both President Nixon and the leader of the Saigon regime claimed that the offensive would be decisive. The enemy hoped to "cut the throat of the Viet Cong" i.e. to choke off our strategic supply routes. Yet after only two months, the enemy had had to withdraw following a series of crushing defeats. The 20-kilometre section of road along which we were travelling was still littered with the hulks of tanks and armoured personnel carriers with rusting caterpillar tracks.

As it was still early when we arrived at Huong Hoa, we made a tour of the old Khe Sanh battlefield, the hub of which had been Ta Con airfield. The names of places such as Khe Sanh, Lang Vay and Ta Con had once been sources of inspiration for many songs by our musicians and also the subject of daily coverage in the press of Western Europe and the USA during the spring and summer of 1968. Breaking a promise to their president, US generals had been forced to send marines to this forested area in order to "live or die together in Khe Sanh". But in the end the US marines had had to be evacuated from this stronghold after five months of artillery shelling and sniper fire by our army which was closing in on Khe Sanh for another Dien Bien Phu. The Khe Sanh battle, which culminated in the encirclement and annihilation of the Lang Vay base, marked the first confrontation between Vietnamese and American armoured troops on the South Vietnam battlefield. Our armoured columns had emerged victorious from this baptism of fire.

The facilities at Ta Con airfield were still in fairly good condition. Our men had the dual responsibility of guarding the airfield and running a big military supply centre as Ta Con had been turned into a major storage depot for convoys carrying food and equipment to the southern front.

Those days the Party Committee of Quang Tri province was headquartered north of Highway 9, between Cam Lo and Dong Ha. We arrived there at nightfall on 30 March. We were greeted on the road by Than, former secretary of Vinh Linh and now secretary of Quang Tri province, and Binh, the provincial military chief. They briefed us regarding the situation in the liberated zone since the signing of the Paris Agreement. The thing which most intrigued us was the question of delimitation of zones under the control of each side, especially in the case of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, a narrow stretch of land where the enemy still maintained quite a strong force. It was clear that we could not retreat to bases in the mountains and leave the whole of the plains to the enemy. We had at all costs to bring about a "leopard skin" situation there although our forces were still small and the popular movement still weak. The important thing was to gain a foothold in order to maintain and develop the movement.

Than and Binh recalled the days of hardship when the enemy had launched a counter-attack in order to re-occupy the Cua Viet seaport. A see-saw battle went on for many days before and after the signing of the Agreement. The enemy launched major operations on four occasions in the "Tidal Wave" campaign with a view to capturing this port, which lay almost exactly on the dividing line between North and South Vietnam and was vital to us for the transportation of supplies to the South. We had been told that the Politburo in Hanoi were extremely preoccupied with this battle and

had been unable to enjoy the Lunar New Year festival with full peace of mind. Finally the Central Military Committee sent Le Trong Tan ⁽¹⁶⁾ to take direct command of the battle and we then destroyed the bulk of the enemy's armoured columns there, forcing them to withdraw.

Next morning we returned to Highway I, the main North-South route. We were greeted at Vinh Linh by Dong, the local Party secretary. I tried to contain my emotion as I stepped on to the bridge which, despite being just a pontoon bridge, definitively linked the two parts of our homeland. Over the past twenty years the enemy had done their best to divide our country by blowing up the Hien Luong bridge. The bridge still spanned the Ben Hai – the river of demarcation.

After crossing the bridge we entered the town of Ho Xa. For years on end this small township had put up stiff resistance against almost daily bombing and shelling by the Americans. All the streets had been razed; only piles of rubble and twisted concrete posts remained. But on both banks of the river and on either side of the road from Hien Luong bridge to the township, makeshift dwellings and shops had been rigged up.

During the night we spent at Vinh Linh I heard many stories about its dauntless people and also about the lives of our men based on Con Co Island off Vinh Linh.

The population had clung to their native district throughout the American air war. Since the beginning of the year old people and children had been returning from places where they had been temporarily evacuated to escape the bombing. In the fields the rice began to come into ear. The green of vegetation had returned to Vinh Linh.

In a roomy and well-protected underground shelter a few kilometres from Ho Xa, formerly the office of the Vinh

Linh Party Committee and the forward command post of Vinh Linh, I talked late into the night with the local authorities. For many years all battle orders and news of victories had been issued from this shelter. Even though I had learned a lot about the heroic fight of the army and people of Vinh Linh, the stories told by the men directly engaged in the fight filled me with profound emotion.

In June 1968 President Ho had sent a letter commending the Vinh Linh army and people for shooting down the 200th US aircraft. Two months later the president commended the fighters on Con Co Island for downing three aircraft within just three hours. About immediate requirements, they said they faced a daunting task – filling in bomb craters, regenerating agricultural land, building new schools and infirmaries, strengthening the armed forces to ensure combat-readiness, and developing their role as a forward post in the fight for the liberation of South Vietnam. First of all, the lives of the population and army had to return to normal.

Early the next morning we set out again and soon reached the headquarters of Army 559 Command. Dong Si Nguyen was away, and we were received by Phan Khac Hy and others from the army command. They sketched an outline of the situation on the strategic supply route known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Fourteen years earlier, the road had come into existence. The task was entrusted by the Central Military Committee for the Army to Vo Ban. The first kilometres of road were laid out along the track left by the first resistance war. Now the road had taken shape on both the maps and on the terrain. It was the result of many years of arduous work by hundreds of thousands of soldiers and ordinary people – surveying, removing rocks and earth, transporting supplies

and fighting to defend the road – a lifeline absolutely vital to the victory of the war of liberation in the South and the whole of Indochina.

Starting as just a path used by a unit of liaison officers from the army's land transport service, the road at that time could be used only by porters on foot whose watchword was "leave no trace when you pass, release no smoke when you cook, and make no noise when you speak". Now it was no longer a "track" as the enemy used to refer to it. Large-scale construction of the road began in early 1965, at the exact moment that the Americans decided to intensify their bombing raids on the Truong Son Range. Within just a few years, a wide vehicular road, complete with river crossings, pipelines and a gigantic system of storage facilities and anti-aircraft fortifications, maintained by hundreds of thousands of soldiers and people and linking the north and south of Indochina, had come into existence.

Speaking of the army which had built and defended this route, Party General Secretary Le Duan once said, "The great victory of the revolution in the South is inseparable from the activities of Army 559 Command. The victory of the South and of the activities of Army 559 Command are two great chapters in our nation's history".

Thanks to good camouflage and the heroic fight put up by anti-aircraft units, in the years 1972 and 1973 the rate at which enemy bombs had hit their targets on the road had fallen to a mere 0.18 per cent.

Thus the route had continued to stretch southwards and by the beginning of 1973 had become a real land communications network with trunk roads, bypasses and detours with a total length of more than 10,000 kilometres.

The extending of this road went along with the increase in the flow of supplies from North to South. US commanders

finally had to admit the failure of their interdiction bombings as well as the ultramodern electronic detection devices dropped on the road and its surroundings.

The US magazine *Newsweek* commented thus on March 31, 1969: "We may delay their transportation of supplies and make them pay a high price but it is certain that we cannot stop them".

Bidding farewell to the comrades from Army 559 Command on the afternoon of 1 April, we made for Dong Hoi Airport where an IL-14 plane had been waiting.

One of our foremost desires on setting foot in the North was to visit President Ho's remains. Construction of the mausoleum had just begun. His body was being preserved by a group of specialists at a place on the outskirts of Hanoi.

A few days after our arrival Vu Ky arranged for the whole delegation to visit President Ho's remains. Sitting in the car I reminisced about my last two meetings with him.

The first took place in 1966 when I was making preparations to go to the battlefield in the 5th Zone in order to inform people about the resolution of the 12th plenum of the Party Central Committee. The President had sent for me. Many members of the Politburo were present when I arrived at the simple cottage which also served as the office of the President. He inquired as to my health and the arrangements I had made for my family. He asked me to take care of myself during the trip and then detailed the task I had to accomplish. He did not forget to ask me to convey his and the Party Central Committee's greetings to the cadres, fighters and people in South Vietnam. Suddenly, he turned and talked to the Politburo members present on this occasion:

"Why haven't you arranged for me to visit the South despite my repeated requests? So many others like Comrade Thai here can go South, so why can't I?"

I remembered a hint of disapproval in his eye when the others replied that it was due to his poor health. He was then 76.

One day the President sent for us. His health had deteriorated considerably as compared with three years earlier. We had been told by some comrades in the Politburo that we should spend one hour at most with him and report only good news and absolutely nothing that might cause him concern. We followed these instructions strictly. At the first meeting the President gave us a warm welcome, enquired after our health, the situation en route and the lives and fight of our army and people in the South. Before we returned to the South, the President again sent for Pham Hung and me. We dined with him, and were happy to see him finish one full bowl of rice.

As we parted, the President clasped our hands and suddenly asked:

"How soon can you arrange for me to visit the South?" We looked at each other without saying anything. We knew that his health had deteriorated greatly, but that a visit by him to the South was not only his personal wish but also the earnest aspiration of fourteen million of our people there. We also understood that his question implied an indirect request that we soon accomplish the task assigned to us by both the CPV Central Committee and himself. The army and people in the South had to accomplish as soon as possible the task the President had set out in his New Year greetings that year, namely, to fight and make the Americans quit and the puppets topple and achieve liberation of the South so that he might soon visit the people there.

That was what Pham Hung told the President. The President seemed greatly delighted by his interpretation, and did not forget to ask us to convey his greetings to the cadres,

army and people of the South.

We did not expect that that would be our last meeting with the President. After we returned to the battlefield and the conclusion of the first phase of the Binh Long campaign in May 1969 the President began to write his Testament. At the end of the second phase of the campaign (in late August 1969), we received a message from the secretary of the Central Military Committee saying that the President had become ill. The message added, "The President wishes to know the result of the Binh Long campaign". We replied that the army had fought very bravely and victoriously in the campaign. In early September, as my comrades and I in the Southern Military Command were directing the third phase of the campaign, the Central Military Department received the terrible news of the President's death.

How can we describe our grief, we who had had the good fortune to live for many years beside the President, who had known his greatness and simplicity, his immense love for the people? For us personally, the loss was all the greater because we had only so recently met with him. I went to see Pham Hung. He was suffering from a high fever. We both sat in silence for a long time. Nobody had thought that our April meeting with the President would be our last.

Pham Hung asked me and the Central Party Information and Training Committee to draft a message to Hanoi. Never before had I felt so shaken. The message was handed to Pham Hung and others in the Central Party Committee for the South, and the Central Military Department of the South Vietnam National Liberation Front. It read : "At this time of grief for the whole country, the South deeply regrets that it has not fully accomplished the liberation of the South in order to welcome him, something so deeply longed for by

himself, the people, cadres, officers and men who have responded to his sacred call and fought heroically and with such perseverance for more than twenty years.

"To be worthy of the immense esteem of President Ho Chi Minh, worthy of his solicitude, and also to make his noble aspiration a reality, the fourteen million people of the South, following the road charted by him for the entire people and army, pledge to unite with the seventeen million people of the North, millions as one, to turn grief into strength and step up resistance in our determination to make the last American withdraw from the South, to overthrow the puppet army and administration, liberate the South, defend the North and peacefully reunify the homeland".

.....

Nguyen Huu Tho was nominated by the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government to head the delegation from the South to the funeral of President Ho.

On the battlefield, the army turned grief into strength and won victory after victory in the third phase of the Binh Long campaign.

Four years had passed. On our return to the North this time we would no longer have the good fortune to be able to clasp the President's hands and listen to his warm commendations. We could only see the President in quiet repose. The same high forehead, the same look of magnanimity on his face. We stood for a long moment; none of us could hold back his tears and everyone blamed himself for not having fulfilled his ultimate aspiration.

Of the two tasks he had assigned to the army and people, only one had been achieved. We had made the Americans quit but not toppled the puppets. We had at all

costs to accomplish the second of his aspirations in honour of his memory and to enable the people of the South to visit his remains as soon as possible.

Abetted by the Americans, the puppet army was implementing a strategy of ending the war but not stopping the fight. An agreement had been signed but the enemy continued to kill our people daily. The blood of our compatriots and combatants was continuing to be shed. Not only had the guns not fallen silent on the battlefield of South Vietnam but the war was tending to escalate dramatically. Determining the right direction for the advance of the revolution in the South had become an urgent issue.

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE REVOLUTION

Two days after our arrival in Hanoi, Le Duan met the whole delegation from B2. He and the rest of the Politburo wanted to our reports and to assessments by cadres direct from the battlefield in order to make better preparations for the meeting of the Central Committee the following month.

After giving us firm handshakes and enquiring after our health, Le Duan said that this meeting, on the morning of 3 April, was not an official one. Many major issues needed more time for greater consideration and further deliberation before a resolution could be reached. Accordingly, he said, he would put some questions for us to consider before the official meeting scheduled for the following week. The issues he raised coincided with the topics of our discussions throughout our trip from South to North.

He did not spend time on a long preamble but came straight to the point. The following were the main points in his speech.

First, how were we to evaluate the success of the Paris Agreement? We had to recognize that this was a victory, the result of the protracted resistance against US aggression. The US had been forced to sign an agreement to end the war and to withdraw all its troops from South Vietnam. But Nguyen Van Thieu remained, the puppet army and

administration remained, the enemy still had large army with a full complement of equipment. What, therefore, were the intentions of the US and Nguyen Van Thieu? What were their strengths and weaknesses? And what were our strengths and weaknesses? This had to be determined on the basis of realities on the battlefield. We also had to correctly appraise the Tet Mau Than general offensive and uprising, both its successes and failures, both its achievements and errors.

Secondly, had the revolution in South Vietnam shifted to a new phase? If it had, what was the situation in the new phase and what should be the direction and form of struggle?

Thirdly, on the basis of this appraisal, we needed to decide the most urgent tasks for the national democratic revolution in the South, especially during this period of transition.

Fourthly, what were the most urgent problems to be solved: to win over the population from the enemy, gain control of villages and build revolutionary power in the communes and districts? Regarding military tasks, how would we build up the local army, what should be the main force and how would we organize it in order to give it the necessary strength. It was absolutely vital to improve the quality of the army in the reorganization. First of all, we had to ensure the troop strength of units from squad to battalion level, and to this end, should we reduce the number of units in order to revitalise the rest and also assign more army cadres to grassroots mass mobilization work?

He informed us that the Politburo could not convene in April because its comrades wanted to listen to more ideas and spend more time thinking about preparations for the May meeting and the 21st plenum of the Central Committee in June. Before parting, Le Duan said to us, "Think this over yourselves and we will meet again next week".

The next day our delegation met and allocated tasks

among ourselves: what should be prepared by each individual, what was to be discussed, and what was to be referred to the Office of the Ministry of Defence for more information.

The General Staff informed us of the enemy's general situation, of both the United States and its agents, both in America and in Southeast Asia, and particularly about the recent Sino-American meeting, in Peking and Chinese intentions, and the results of the recent army recruitment drive.

The general Logistics Department briefed us on the situation for the first three months of the year and what might happen during the remaining months of 1973. I also had a meeting with the General Political Department to which I reported on the political and ideological situation of our cadres and army following the signing of the Paris Agreement, and sounded out possibilities for reinforcing the contingent of cadres on the battlefield.

We talked over the telephone with Pham Hung, secretary of the Central Military Department, and others in the Politburo in the North, on several other vital issues and to learn more about the situation in the North since we had left for the South. Thus, with the suggestion from Le Duan and information supplied by various ministerial departments, coupled with the talks we had with "on-the-spot" leaders, our delegation already had a sound basis for thoroughly discussing what needed to be reported to the Politburo. Although some issues needed further clarification we had already gained much clearer vistas of the general situation.

On 4 April, we received a message from Nguyen Chuc, responsible for the Combat Operations Section, then another message from Le Duc Anh, commander of the 9th Military Zone, giving us a general description of the military situation

during March. In this zone alone the enemy had launched more than a thousand operations at company and battalion level, targeting our position in Chuong Thien province, fifty per cent more than over the previous month. But their air operations had diminished and the results of their ground raids were also poorer. We overran more enemy positions than we lost to them.

This took us back to the question raised by Le Duan about what the form and tactics of the struggle should be in this new situation when the enemy was more and more openly violating the Paris Agreement and increasing their pacification and land-seizure attacks.

On 12 April and during the following days we had a series of meetings with Le Duan and others from the Politburo which were not in the nature of a formal conference. Our delegation reported to them on the situation. They asked about this and that and raised some further issues for us to ponder.

I reported to them on general developments in the military situation. This was in fact a review of the situation in 1972 before and after the signing of the Paris Agreement. Nguyen Minh Duong reported on the political and military situation in the 8th Zone, Vo Van Kiet on the situation in the 9th Zone and Tran Nam Trung on that in the eastern provinces. On 19 April Nguyen Van Linh reported on the political struggle in the urban areas.

Le Duan asked more questions as he listened to us. He also made his own comments and asked us to discuss his assessments.

Thus, by 19 April, through our discussions we had already arrived at the following conclusions:

- The possibility of US intervention had diminished but to what extent, and its impact on the Nguyen Van Thieu regime, remained to be seen;

- In this transitional period, winning over the population from the enemy in both the towns and countryside had a very significant role. It was actually a very bitter contest which was going on. But we still had to find the most appropriate slogans, directives and forms of struggle in conditions of blatant enemy violation of the agreement;

- Needless to say, the best solution would be to achieve peace, national reconciliation and democracy which would avoid more bloodshed. But to this end, we must necessarily strengthen the movement against the Thieu regime. Was it essential to overthrow Nguyen Van Thieu if we were to establish a tripartite coalition government and did we already have the practical potential to implement this slogan?

- It was imperative to quickly build up both our political and military forces, stressing quality, especially with regard to the main force of the army, because only with a "powerful punch" by the main force could we launch a general counter-offensive when the occasion presented itself. On the other hand, it was also very necessary to develop the local armies.

We had reached almost complete consensus on the above issues, but in my innermost thoughts I believed that some of them need further consideration.

From early April on the enemy continued their police, pacification and land-seizure operations. It is worth noting that the enemy had been concentrating their attacks on Chuong Thien and more recently on our positions along Highway 7, especially at Ri-net.

The Central Party Committee for South Vietnam issued Instruction No-02 to quickly correct mistakes and shortcomings in the implementation of our military tactics on the battlefield, especially in applying the experiences of the 9th Zone in the fight against enemy land-seizure attacks. Our

primary concern was effectively breaking the enemy's pacification campaign because this was the only effective way to win over the population.

Vo Van Kiet had already communicated to Le Duc Anh Le Duan's first suggestions.

On April 19, Nguyen Van Linh addressed the meeting. His report dealt with many issues, especially the mass movement in both the towns and countryside in the Mekong river delta and more particularly, in Saigon and on its fringes. (He had over the last two years taken direct charge of the popular movement in the Saigon area.) A correct assessment of the political attitude of each social stratum and class through different periods, and the reactionary nature of political parties founded by the enemy in South Vietnam over the past few years and currently would be the necessary basis on which the Front should formulate correct policies in order to win over the great majority of the masses to the revolution.

Over the past 18 years, Nguyen Van Linh said, the economic life and political attitudes of social classes in the South had undergone profound changes as a result of the overwhelming impact of many factors both on our side and among enemy ranks, and also on the situation in the three Indochinese countries and throughout the world.

On the class struggle and disposition of revolutionary forces, Nguyen Van Linh gave the following information.

For nearly two decades, especially since the US began its massive troop commitment to South Vietnam to conduct a local war, there had been strong industrial development, chiefly in the area of consumer goods production and those catering for the war effort. This brought with it fairly rapid development of a body of workers though without homogeneity in its class characteristics. Older workers who knew the enemy well, generally speaking, still retained their revolutionary spirit

and class traditions . As for the majority of younger workers who had come from the countryside, these had little experience in class struggle even though they were very active in the fight for better working and living conditions. Meanwhile, the trade union organization fell far short of its potential role as a nucleus for mobilizing the masses in the political struggle in urban areas.

Poorer people in the towns had many interestes in common with the workers. They were also exploited and oppressed, were subject to repeated terror tactics and draft round-ups, and had a deep hatred for the Americans and their henchmen. Together with the workers they formed the backbone of the revolution in the towns and constituted a strong and reliable force. However, despite their numerical strength they remained a scattered force because they worked in a wide variety of jobs and often their actions were spontaneous.

Meanwhile, the peasants, especially those who had received land distributed by the revolutionary administration during the resistance against the French, or who had played a crucial role in the concerted uprising of the early 1960's, were now the main force in the political and armed struggle and the movement to convert soldiers in enemy ranks, and also constituted the main source of manpower and materials for the resistance. They had displayed a large measure of courage, resourcefulness and tenacity in the struggle, and were a trustworthy ally of the working class. Together with the working class they formed the main force of the revolution. Under the impact of a prolonged war and the neocolonialist policy of the United States, stratification had **taken** place to one extent or another amongst the working class. But since the signing of the Paris Agreement, due to the enemy's brutal policy effected through the land-seizure and

pacification campaigns of the Nguyen Van Thieu government, the movement among the peasants, including in areas rated as "weak" in the past, had developed to a higher level.

Following the signing of the Paris Agreement, small traders, small property-owners, school pupils and students had shown great enthusiasm for the great people's victory. They were stepping up their struggle to protest against the blatant violations of the Paris Agreement by the Thieu administration and to demand peace, national independence, democracy and a better life. Like the poor in the towns, they were proving themselves to be reliable allies of the working class. However, like the working class in the towns, they lacked close-knit organization and their actions were sometimes modelled on the methods employed by the bourgeoisie of the old society.

The intellectuals of South Vietnam welcomed the Paris Agreement wished to resolve the internal affairs of South Vietnam in a spirit of national concord and reconciliation. One section wanted to take part in a national conciliation council in their capacity as a Third Force and political representative of the national bourgeoisie. They wanted the South to enjoy political independence and become a bourgeois democracy. They tried to rally those of different political affiliation to form the Third Force opposed to Nguyen Van Thieu. At the same time, they tried to increase their influence among the petty bourgeoisie in an attempt to eventually share power with us in a future coalition government. Another section, influenced by the active mass revolutionary movement, and under the leadership of the Party, became an active force within the intelligentsia of South Vietnam. We should and could win over an important part of the intelligentsia so that they might take part in the coalition front and government in order to conduct united action and overthrow the Nguyen Van Thieu clique.

Also following the Paris Agreement, the national bourgeoisie had showed increasing support for the ideals of peace, independence and democracy, and also wanted to take part in a national reconciliation council and tripartite coalition government, plus share leadership with us in order to steer South Vietnam in their own policy direction. We could develop the positive aspects of this and get them to join us in the struggle against the Americans in order to isolate Thieu and set up a really democratic national coalition government in the South.

Nguyen Van Linh's report also dealt with other forces and the possibility of mobilizing them within the common struggle. These were the millions of religious believers, people from ethnic minorities, and tens of thousands who had gone South after the Geneva Agreements in 1954, hundreds of thousands of Chinese residents and the majority of war wounded and troops and other personnel of the Saigon army and administration. He analyzed the different factors which had influenced their political attitudes after the signing of the Paris Agreement and discussed whether the conditions and potential existed for us to rally them together a broad united national front against the US and Thieu in the immediate future.

After listening to Nguyen Van Linh's report, Le Duan suggested that we should study the following questions further:

- What was the real intention of the CIA in its efforts to control middle forces such as students, Buddhists and Catholics?
- Was it true that we needed now to win over to our side : one, the popular masses in enemy-controlled areas who had been previously organized by us and remained loyal to the revolution; two, the Third Force (especially the petit bourgeoisie, and those supporting peace and neutrality); and three, the population in the newly liberated zones?

— How would we foster nationalism, and democratic sentiment in order to defeat the reactionary and corrupting ideology and culture of the enemy?

After several days spent listening to our reports and discussing them with us, on 25 April Le Duan asked us to give more thought to several priority tasks for the immediate future, such as mass mobilization, the struggle to win over the population in all three strategic zones (urban, rural, and mountainous), the building up of three forces in the army (regular and local armies, militia and guerrillas), the revolutionary organization in the towns and in the puppet army, Front administrative work, the building of local revolutionary bases and the rear base, Party development, and so on.

By this time Tran Van Tra had travelled from Saigon to Hanoi. He took time off to discuss with the various offices of the Foreign Ministry the current status of our work with the quadripartite ceasefire commission and the implementation of the Paris Agreement. I exchanged views with him on issues raised earlier and completed our military report to be submitted to the Central Military Committee.

Before leaving for the North on 27 February I had sent to the Central Military Committee a message setting out my views on the situation during the first month after the signing of the Paris Agreement. Ten days later I received a message from Vo Nguyen Giap asking me to make a detailed report at the forthcoming conference. Experience gained over the past three months made it necessary for me to add many things to my report. It had now become clearer that it was not enough to launch a broad movement of political struggle to demand peace, national independence, democracy, better living conditions and national reconciliation, but more imperative still was the need to defeat the enemy's pacification

campaign and break their control in order to create the right conditions for local uprisings.

In early May we had several working sessions with the Central Military Committee for the Army. Present were Vo Nguyen Giap, Van Tien Dung, Song Hao, Le Trong Tan, Tran Qui Mai, and Le Quang Dao.

On behalf of the B2 delegation (South Vietnam) I reported to the commission on the general situation. The report had been unanimously passed by all members of our delegation.

In 1972 our army and people in South Vietnam had won victories of great strategic significance. This was first of all because the CPV Central Committee and the Central Party Military Committee for the Army had made timely assessment of the situation, and determined the correct direction of operations especially with regard to the slogans and tactics in the struggle against the enemy's pacification campaign. However, these successes were still limited by the balance of forces on the battlefield. The enemy still had many strengths and we had weaknesses that remained to be overcome. We had relied too much on the "opportunity strategy" and underestimated the enemy in many respects. They retained very tight control over the population, making it impossible for us to launch local uprisings.

For our part, our leadership on the battlefield still revealed many handicaps, especially these originating from subjectivism and simplistic thinking. Our ideological and organizational work revealed many weak points.

The balance of forces could be summed up as follows. Although the situation differed from one battlezone to another, on the whole the enemy remained stronger than us in terms of both military strength and equipment, especially with regard to the air force, mechanised units and command

communications. The ratio of military strength over the whole of South Vietnam was 1 to 2.5 in the enemy's favour.

I also reported to the Central Military Committee on our discussions and the preliminary suggestions of Le Duan who stressed the importance of a correct assessment of the situation and correct forecasting of developments in the months ahead. Before the Paris Agreement was signed we had predicted two possibilities. Either the war would continue for some years, or it might end in a relatively short period of time. However, as things had evolved after the signing of the Agreement, the war had not continued as in the past but neither did we yet have peace.

Experience had shown more and more clearly that the enemy remained very obstinate and it would not be easy to form a tripartite coalition government and achieve democracy and national reconciliation. As suggested by the Central Military Department for South Vietnam in mid-March and the recently expressed view of Le Duan, we had to always hold firm to the strategy of revolutionary violence and offensive, and to actively build up our forces in all fields – militarily, politically and diplomatically. But this was to be applied in a creative and flexible way depending on the conditions applying on each locality and at each point in time, but with the common resolve of defeating the enemy's pacification programme, winning over the population and extending the area under our control.

Through documents captured from the enemy it was clear that the Nguyen Van Thieu government was conducting a very brutal and cunning programme of rural pacification, codenamed AB 148, which was part of the Ly Thuong Kiet plan for 1973. It had a very flattering name – the "rural reconstruction" programme – which essentially consisted of launching a series of military operations to dislodge us from

areas under their control, seizing back land from our liberated zones and expelling our forces from contested areas in order to do away with the "leopard skin" situation while stepping up psychological warfare and terrorizing families which had member in the revolutionary forces. They hoped to stabilize the situation in areas under their control and expand their political base among the Democratic Party of Nguyen Van Thieu and in the Popular Front for Peace in order to tightly control the population in anticipation of a general election.

That is why as a guideline for action I proposed that in the liberated zone, we must maintain and constantly consolidate our forces in all fields, military and political as well as economic. We must stand prepared in all fields so as to defeat the enemy wherever and whenever they encroached military on our liberated zone.

In the contested areas where our forces were predominant and revolutionary power had been established but exercised control at different levels, we had to step up the political and armed struggle combined with the struggle on the legal plane in order to preserve and expand our control. Here, too, we must resolutely fight to drive the enemy out if they conducted land-seizure attacks.

In enemy-controlled areas, especially townships where the enemy maintained tight control, we had to combine the political, armed and legal struggles while meting out due punishment to the most reactionary among their agents.

As regard the disposition and use of forces I suggested that we concentrate on strengthening the three main force divisions in South Vietnam in order to get them ready to fight in the eastern part and in the Mekong River delta. As for the main forces of our military zones, they should be deployed to the south and north of Highway 4 in the 8th Military Zone

and Chuong Thien province in the 9th Zone. In the east we should break the enemy encirclement and link up with Bien Hoa and Ba Ria.

In my report I laid special emphasis on the need to co-ordinate all the armed forces of South Vietnam in the event of a concentrated attack by the enemy in the Mekong River delta. In that case the forces of the 8th Military Zone would defend the areas south and north of Highway 4, the forces of the 9th Military Zone would defend Chuong Thien and those of eastern Nam Bo would defend Highway 13. Special force units would take on enemy logistics bases and airfields.

It was absolutely imperative to replenish and reinforce both the regional forces and forces in each military zone. As for the details, I suggested that we should discuss them with the General Staff.

Then Vo Van Kiet and Nguyen Minh Duong, the two key leaders from the 8th and 9th Zones in the Mekong delta, reported on the necessity and possibility of controlling key areas, and on the plan to coordinate action between the two military zones and measures through which the 9th Military Zone might expand to form a liberated area encompassing a population of 1.8 million, as directed by the Regional Committee.

Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung suggested that we should draw upon battlefield experience and give more thought to the following questions which would be topics at the upcoming Politburo meeting.

There still remained two possibilities. Either we could force the enemy to de-escalate in order to stabilize the situation. Or, in view of enemy obstinacy the situation could not be stabilized. However, in either case the see-saw struggle could not drag on for too long. The essential part was for us to step up the movement in both the towns and countryside.

Regarding the present balance of forces, Politburo members recalled that big changes had taken place since 1963. In the years 1963 and 1964 the ratio was five to one in favour of the enemy. It was four to one in 1967 and 1968. Now that the Americans and their allies had pulled out, the troop strength of the enemy had fallen sharply, but a more careful analysis was necessary in order to make a more objective and accurate evaluation.

As for guidelines, a combination of political with armed struggle still held but this must be applied flexibly according to each zone. Moreover, there was the legal struggle which we also needed to step up in an intelligent way.

On the building up of forces, there was no doubt that we needed to increase our forces quickly but by what means? Without doubt, the North would send in many more reinforcements but the South itself had to make much bigger efforts to build up local armies, militia and guerrilla forces.

A meeting was held between the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee for the Army and our delegation, but this remained chiefly an exchange of views like the one we had had with Le Duan three months earlier. Each of us made further comments and clarifications but no conclusion was reached on any issue. We all waited for the final conclusions of the upcoming expanded meeting of the Politburo.

During the conference we received a message from Le Duc Anh who gave a clearer picture of the situation in the 9th Military Zone.

During April the enemy had launched the Dong Khoi-Quyet Tien Operation to "pacify" many key communes in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh provinces. But particularly noteworthy was the fact that the enemy had lost more positions than they took from us or set up in the communes. The enemy still paid special attention to drafting more youths into the army and

upgrading the "self-defence" force to militia and the militia to regular army. The population continued to fight the enemy on all fronts – political and military – resisting the draft while contributing more manpower and resources to the fight for liberation. The remedying of deviations from guidelines both among cadres and people had brought visible results.

In mid-May Tran Van Tra and I met and discussed the situation with Le Trong Tan and Tran Sam, both deputy chiefs of the General Staff. We mainly discussed the building up of our military forces in the South in the light of new developments.

We reached consensus on the number of troops required in the 1973 recruitment drive to be submitted for approval by the Politburo. As a man with a long record of service at the General Staff I quite understood the difficulties we usually encountered during recruitment campaigns.

Counting only from the day the US had committed its troops to South Vietnam, the war had lasted for eight long years, almost as long as the entire war of resistance against the French. But it exceeded the scale of the former resistance by far both in terms of scale and the forces involved. In the past eight years we had mobilized nearly one and a half million young men in the North into the army, most of whom were later sent to the South.

At its peak this represented 1.6 per cent of the population of North Vietnam. Most of the young recruits came from the Red River delta, accounting for 7.5 per cent of its population. Topping the list was Thai Binh province which had mobilized more than 8 per cent of its population into the army by 1972.

How would we maintain troop strength at the necessary level in case the war continued while ensuring the necessary labour force to heal the wounds of war, and rehabilitate and develop the economy of the North in order to increase sup-

plies to the South? We were told that in the coming recruitment drive we should limit to the minimum the recruitment of workers and government employees while not neglecting the quality of the new soldiers.

By now, our army deployed in South Vietnam already made up about 11 per cent of the armed forces over the whole country. We asked for 12,000 to 15,000 more troops for the South in 1973. For the regular army we would reduce the number of units and increase its fighting capacity by ensuring that each regiment would have at least 1,500 men and each battalion from 300 to 350 men. At the same time, we would have to quickly expand the local armies and militia to ensure the necessary balance between the three kinds of armed forces.

In the matter of equipment, the biggest problem was the shortage of ammunition for artillery. Only when this question was solved could we think of launching major counter-attacks.

A day of discussions helped us gain a clearer picture of the general situation in the country. On the other hand, it helped the leadership to understand better the most immediate and urgent problems in South Vietnam. It also raised my awareness of the importance of the North, the rear base, with regard to the South, the great front. The North, as I saw it, had become one of the decisive factors in the victory of the war of resistance. However, to transform this potential into reality on the battlefield the strategic offices of the Party, including the General Staff and the various general departments in the Ministry of Defence, would play an indispensable and ever greater role.

The expanded conference of the Politburo of the Central Committee was convened on May 24, 1973.

The conference was attended by most members of the Politburo. The delegation from the South comprised Tran Huu Duc (Tri Thien), Vo Chi Cong and Chu Huy Man (5th

Military Zone), Nguyen Van Linh, Tran Van Tra, Tran Nam Trung, Vo Van Kiet, Nguyen Minh Duong and myself (South Vietnam). The Ministry of Defence was represented by Le Trong Tan, Song Hao, Le Quang Dao and others. The atmosphere at the conference brought to mind a similar conference 20 years earlier. The Party Politburo had then also convened an expanded conference, in September 1953. It issued the historic resolution on the strategic direction for our military operations in the last dry season of the resistance against the French, which led to the historic Dien Bien Phu victory.

The history of our nation over the past few decades had proved convincingly that at each turning point in history, unity of mind and action of the Central Committee and within the Politburo had been the primary condition for all ensuing successes. In particular, the Politburo, through its practical actions, had demonstrated that it was actually the highest level of command to take charge of direction of the fight, both in the resistance against the French in the past and now in the war of liberation against American aggression. This was all the clearer at this conference. All participants, from members of the Politburo to high-ranking officers fresh from the battlefield, shared an unshakeable belief in the fact that the collective wisdom of the Central Committee would correctly assess the situation in all fields and chart out the path to victory for the revolution in the South.

Before the conference met, the Party Central Committee had carefully prepared a draft Politburo report which raised the most crucial questions for discussion.

In his opening speech, General Secretary Le Duan laid great emphasis on the most burning questions which he urged the conference to focus on. As a background for discussions, he outlined the main developments in the revolu-

tion in the South during the 18 years since direct US intervention. The following is the gist of his remarks.

"It is the intention of US imperialism to stem the spread of communism and check the national liberation movement. Even after our victory over the French aggressors, we had to sign the Geneva Agreement under many constraints stemming from complexities in the world situation. There was nothing wrong in signing this, something which was necessary and correct because it represented a very major, very fundamental victory for our nation. However, in those days we did not fully perceive the nature and strategies of the enemy. In fact, in entering South Vietnam to replace the French, the Americans not only aimed to prevent the revolution in the South but also to implement a much larger counter-revolutionary scheme on a global scale in which the occupation of South Vietnam was an important link.

"Because we are determined to complete the national liberation revolution and take the whole country on to the socialist path, Vietnam has become the focus of the main conflict of our times and the frontline in the fight against imperialism for national liberation. In the past 18 years our people have gone from one victory to another. Resolution 15 of the Party Central Committee (on launching a politico-military movement to liberate the South - *Tr.*) saw the light in an international context very unfavourable to us. But we made the right decision based on a correct evaluation of the balance of forces. We could not help feeling somewhat embarrassed when the enemy launched their "special war" strategy. But again we correctly evaluated the enemy's capabilities and limitations and we won repeatedly at Ap Bac, Binh Gia and Ba Gia, forcing the enemy to abandon this strategy. When the US began its massive troop commitment to the South, bringing in 200,000, 300,000 then 500,000 men

to conduct the "local war", again we made the right assessment of the enemy's forces and strategy. Instead of retreating we decided to continue our attacks. A correct appraisal of the Tet Mau Than general uprising and offensive should be made. Our policy of launching concerted attacks on the enemy in the towns to extend the liberated zones in the countryside was a correct decision. However, after the first drive we were slow to read – just our programme of action, which led to the loss of vast areas in the countryside and serious losses in manpower which could have been avoided. But later when the enemy began their "Vietnamisation of the war" strategy we capitalized on their error in taking their troops to Cambodia by launching a counter-offensive and helping the Cambodian people to rise up. Within a short period, two thirds of Cambodian territory, comprising three quarters of the population of Cambodia, had been liberated, driving the enemy into a quagmire and creating conditions for the revolution of the Cambodian people to vigorously develop. This was followed by our victory on Highway 9 in southern Laos where we broke the main force of the Saigon army, the mainstay of the Vietnamisation strategy. Subsequent victories during the 1972 strategic offensive and especially the defeat of the American B52 blitz against Hanoi and Haiphong in December that year completely bankrupted the Vietnamisation policy of the US and forced it to sign the Paris Agreement on Vietnam.

"The Paris Agreement was a very great victory. Under this agreement the US has had to end its war of aggression against Vietnam, withdraw all its troops and the troops of its allies from the South of our country, commit itself to respecting the fundamental national rights of the Vietnamese people, viz. independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, to respect the right to self-determination of the people of South Vietnam, end its military commitment and in-

tervention in the internal affairs of South Vietnam, and recognize the existence of two administrations, two armies, two zones of control and three political forces in South Vietnam ⁽¹⁷⁾.

The experience of the past 18 years had proved conclusively the correctness, independence and creativeness of the Party's line in a very complex international context; correct because it met the aspirations of our people for national independence and socialism, corresponded with the revolutionary objectives of our time and had won the sympathy and support of the majority of the people of the world.

We had also learned invaluable lessons over those 18 years but we needed to study these experiences in all seriousness so as to draw the correct conclusions and lead the revolution in South Vietnam in the time ahead.

What was the enemy's intention after the Paris Agreement and could they implement it? To answer this question we had to correctly evaluate the enemy and the existing balance of forces in South Vietnam. For this purpose, we had to rely on a firm theoretical basis and also on practical experience on the battlefield. There was no denying that they still had many strong points but they were, on the whole, on a downward trend, not in a position of strength.

We were not scared when the US moved in. Now that it had to pull out its troops there remained only the Saigon army. Even though Nguyen Van Thieu continues to receive substantial aid from the US, we were in a much stronger and winning position. But how would we win and when?

Now that the US and its agents were blatantly sabotaging the Paris Agreement and obviously committed to continuing the war, there was no alternative for the revolution in South Vietnam but to use revolutionary violence to oppose them. The military aspect naturally must be our first concern.

But the armed struggle must be combined with the political struggle and campaigning among the men in the Saigon army alongside the fight on the legal front.

The conference aimed to evaluate the development of the situation since the Paris Agreement, the balance of forces, the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy and our own in order to chart out a correct path for the revolution.

Battlefield realities provided the basis for such an evaluation. The military leaders spoke first. Nguyen Van Linh, Tran Van Tra, Vo Chi Cong, Tran Huu Duc, Vo Van Kiet and Nguyen Minh Duong took turns to give their own evaluations. They expressed their full endorsement of the assessments and views in the draft report of the Politburo as well as suggestions made by the General Secretary in his opening speech.

They devoted a good deal of time to detailing the situation in the military zones under their control and outlining preliminary lessons and experiences learned in leadership. For my part, I dwelt more on the military situation in the whole region and made a few suggestions as to directions and guidelines for future actions.

Giving his observations on the general offensive and uprising during the Tet Mau Than of 1968, Truong Chinh stressed its major impact on enemy strategy. It had forced the Americans to de-escalate their war and abandon their local war strategy. However, he said, our success had been limited not because the enemy was too strong but really because of our own mistakes, especially errors in our evaluation of the situation right after first wave of assaults on the towns.

Referring to the current situation, Truong Chinh said that only four months had passed but the enemy had already revealed their overt intention to renege on the Paris Agreement. This had led to a situation in which both peace and war

co-existed in South Vietnam though the level of fighting had greatly abated compared with before. But, he added, this situation could not go on for a long time and eventually we would either have genuine peace or the war would escalate. The struggle would be very tough and in either case we must be very flexible, and should not tie ourselves to any rigid option.

Pham Van Dong analyzed US strategy and capabilities, and our directions and tactics in the struggle during the months ahead. We asked: "What does the United States want? It wants to carry on its neo-colonialist policy in South Vietnam in new conditions. But to want is one thing and to be able to achieve the objective is quite another. The United States is crippled by difficulties in many fields. We can assert that the US has weakened compared with earlier. It cannot reverse the situation in South Vietnam. However, US imperialism is very brutal, very reactionary and still has enormous potential. We must closely follow the strategies and methods of both the US and its Saigon agents. We have to feel the enemy's pulse if we are to defeat them in a clever and determined manner after we have charted out the correct path to final victory".

He continued, "If we want to force the enemy to de-escalate, we must use violence, to strike them repeatedly, wearing them out in order to defeat them step by step and foil their plans step by step. This is why at the present time we have to consider the armed struggle our priority to put military struggle above all. It is not wrong to say that the military struggle must go in parallel with political struggle, but at this juncture armed struggle must be the mainstay for the political struggle. This does not mean that we make light of or neglect the strength of political struggle which is a great strength and has a big role to play in the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam. The relationship between military and political force must also be reflected in the disposition of forces over the

whole of South Vietnam so that the one might be the main support of the other".

Then Nguyen Duy Trinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Van Tien Dung, Le Thanh Nghi and Le Van Luong took turns in speaking out about their views. They made important additions to the draft report after listening to the leaders of various battle zones.

The expanded conference of the Politburo ended after a week of intensive work. Members of the Poliburo and the military leaders from various battle zones reached unanimity on different aspects of the situation.

On June 1st, the First Secretary summed up the discussions. Le Duan said,

"The heated debate and its results underline the complete unanimity of views among the leadership on many crucial questions. It reflects another step in the maturing of our Party through the realities of struggle". He then made a general observation:

"Our meeting has been unanimous in asserting that the successes of 18 years of fighting against the American aggressors are great. They have a profound historical and epoch-making significance. Through 18 years of dauntless and creative struggle, our people and combatants in the south throughout the country have repeatedly defeated the strategies of several successive US presidents in their aggression against our country. The Vietnamese nation has defeated in a glorious manner the longest, greatest and most brutal neo-colonialist war of aggression by the chief imperialist power in the world at present, dealing a bruising blow to the, "flexible response", strategy of the US imperialists. The US failure in Vietnam is a heavy blow to the role of the United States as the chief intentional gendarme

and to the overall strength of the United States and also saps its prestige and position in the world. This has consequently caused the balance of forces on a world scale to change more and more in favour of revolution."

The conference reaffirmed the Party's policy of upholding the banner of national independence and socialism and closely linking the two strategic tasks of the revolution in the South and the North, aimed at the common objective of achieving full national independence, reunifying the country and advancing to socialism. That is the correct and creative revolutionary line of the Party, the law of development of the revolution in our country and of the struggle to liberate the South during the past 18 years as well as in the time to come. Over these 18 years we have also had very valuable lessons and experiences in the leadership and guidance of war. These lessons and experiences should be reviewed to serve the present struggle.

The conference also reached unanimity in evaluating the situation in South Vietnam since the signing of the Paris Agreement (from January 28 to June 1, 1973). The US had been compelled to end its war of aggression and pull out all its troops and those of its satellites from South Vietnam and end its war of destruction and blockade against North Vietnam. But in the South the ceasefire had not come into effect, peace had not been really restored and the Saigon administration, abetted by the US, continued the war effort in many places though with lesser intensity and on a lesser scale than earlier when US troops were still in the South. It had launched repeated pacification campaigns to repress and terrorize the population in the areas under its control. The Paris Agreement was being violated very seriously and blatantly. The conference affirmed that the main enemy of the revolution in South Vietnam at present was the US and

puppet administration. The Saigon administration which represented the interests of the comprador capitalists who are bureaucratic, militarist and fascist by nature, a client administration which relied on countering revolutionary violence to consolidate the neo-colonialist regime of the United States, was the immediate enemy of the revolution in South Vietnam.

Evaluating the balance of forces in South Vietnam, the conference observed that the Saigon administration still had its strengths, namely it still kept a large and well-equipped army, it still controlled many urban areas with a big population and a concentration of material resources as well as important communication routes. It continued to receive military and economic aid from the US. However, it had fundamental weaknesses. Its weakest point was in the political field, since it was increasingly opposed by a discontented population. Militarily, the Saigon army, which had never had a high level of morale, was now more demoralized than ever following the withdrawal of half a million US and satellite troops. It was also plagued by major financial problems. For our part, the position and influence of the South Vietnamese revolution had been growing stronger and stronger since 1954. We had strong and widely distributed political forces, a mature regular army, a quite impressive local army. We controlled many areas in the mountains and plains alike, and had established our bases in the towns. However, the political forces had developed neither quickly nor evenly enough, especially in urban areas. The three spearheads, political struggle, armed struggle and persuasion among enemy ranks were not strong enough. The armed forces still needed more balanced development since the local armies and the militia and guerrillas remained weak in many places. After the signing of the Paris Agreement some rightist tendencies had been detected here and there and at given periods of time in the policy toward the enemy. The losses suffered by our

bases in enemy-controlled areas had not been made up in time. Generally speaking, we had become much stronger than the enemy in the South and on a national scale.

The conference unanimously agreed that the situation might evolve in one of these possible directions. Either, owing to our active struggle on all fronts, political, military, diplomatic and legal, we could step by step force the enemy to implement the Paris Agreement on Vietnam and thus peace might really be restored. Or, owing to their very reactionary nature, the US and its Saigon agents would continue to violate and sabotage the agreement and thus the military conflict would intensify and broaden and we would have to continue our revolutionary struggle for some time more to defeat the enemy and win complete victory. We should strive for the first possibility but must be at the same time ready to cope with the second possibility. Both possibilities existed and were evolving. We had to be flexible but firm.

The conference asserted that in either case, the revolution in South Vietnam could be won only through revolutionary violence and whatever the circumstances, we had to seize the opportunity while keeping firmly to an offensive strategy and adopt a flexible direction in order to take the revolution forward. The question of winning the population over from the enemy, seizing control of more territory and developing the forces of the revolution was both an urgent and fundamental requirement of the South Vietnam revolution at **this moment in time.**

The conference unanimously pointed out that the fundamental task of the South Vietnam revolution in the new stage was to continue implementing the line of the national democratic people's revolution. In the immediate future it was to unite the entire people and struggle at the same time on the three fronts – political, military and diplomatic – and,

depending on time and place, to take the initiative in combining these three fronts in the most flexible manner, to uphold the banner of peace, independence and national reconciliation and resolutely defeat all enemy strategies and actions sabotaging the Paris Agreement. At the same time, it was necessary to preserve and develop the revolutionary forces in all spheres and to defeat the enemy step by step to prepare the most satisfactory conditions to cope with the enemy in all circumstances, ready to take the revolution in South Vietnam to complete victory.

While we upheld the slogan of peace, independence and national reconciliation to broadly rally all national and democratic forces, the enemy resorted to military actions to systematically violate the agreement. This was why we had to resolve to counter-attack to preserve and advance our initiative in all fields and defeat all acts of enemy counter revolutionary violence. At the same time, we had to closely combine the armed struggle with the political struggle and the diplomatic struggle. We had to adopt a common guideline and methods of struggle in different areas: liberated zones, contested zones and enemy-controlled areas.

The conference also pointed to the duty of the North toward the revolution in the South, and the need to increase solidarity among the three Indochinese countries, and to unite with the fraternal countries in the socialist system and the world revolutionary movement.

The conference decided on the following immediate main tasks: to build up and utilise the armed forces, to intensify efforts to win the population over from the enemy, to broaden the areas under our control, to step up the campaign of persuasion among enemy ranks, to boost revolutionary work in urban areas, to build and strengthen the

liberated zones, to improve the united front work and the diplomatic struggle and Party work.

After summing up what had been agreed upon at the conference, the First Secretary pointed to some important experiences of the past and the tasks ahead. The following is the gist of his speech.

– The enemy is resorting to military action to systematically violate the agreement. We must resolutely counter-attack to preserve and develop our initiative in all areas.

– We must defeat their pacification and land-seizure operations, must achieve close co-operation among the three kinds of armed forces and the three prongs of attack, among the different strategic areas and among the different battle fields in order to deal the enemy crushing blows. We must recover the areas lost to the enemy and reduce the area under their control.

– On guidelines and tactics for the struggle for this new stage, we must firmly grasp the idea of strategic offensive but must base ourselves on concrete circumstances to apply it in a flexible and effective manner. We must firmly preserve and develop our forces in all fields and weaken and erode the military and political forces of the enemy so that the balance of forces might continue to change in our favour. We must see that we should grow militarily and politically in all the three strategic areas, must remain strong in each of the three types of armed forces, ready to fight and fight successfully. We must closely co-ordinate all three fronts – military, political and diplomatic – and associate this struggle with the struggle to win over the population from the enemy and the expansion of areas under our control.

– On the immediate main tasks, we must firmly control the armed forces, quickly strengthen and develop the three kinds of armed forces and overcome the present imbalance,

and position our forces so as to scatter the enemy thinly and prevent them from concentrating in order to attack any specific area. We must see that the foremost political task in South Vietnam at present is to win over the population and expand the areas under our control.

The points on which the Politburo reached unanimity and the subsequent conclusions drawn by the First Secretary later became the main contents of the draft report of the Politburo at the 21st plenum of the Party Central Committee in June, and further on became the resolution of this plenum issued in October 1973. After the conference of the Politburo the Minister for National Defence instructed us to prepare for a working meeting with the Ministry on specific questions concerning the South Vietnam battlefield.

This working session between leaders of the Defence Ministry and our B2 delegation took place on June 11, and aimed to make more specific the issues addressed at the Politburo conference. We analysed the enemy's basic strategy and made projections of their military actions in the coming rainy season. The main target of their pacification campaign would be the Mekong River delta. They might attack and occupy a number of areas in the liberated zones, as could be seen from their transfer of strategic reserve forces from Tri Thien to the delta. The Saigon army would continue with forced recruitment to increase both its regular and local troop numbers. If the Lon Nol government in Cambodia were to face possible collapse, the United States might force Nguyen Van Thieu and the reactionaries in Thailand to come to its rescue as had been seen on earlier occasions.

Fully grasping the idea of strategic offensive, we determined that the foremost task for B2 in the near future was to defeat at all costs the enemy's land-seizure operations, and defend and preserve the liberated zones, contested areas and the liberated "pockets" in enemy-held zones. We must basi-

cally liberate the population brought by the enemy to areas under its control after January 28 (south and north of Highway 4, Ben Tre province, and various intermediate areas around Saigon and Cho Lon), actively expand the contested areas and areas under our control, and step by step extend the liberated zones where conditions permitted.

We decided that in the dry season battles ahead, we must ensure rapid, clear-cut and major successes in annihilation battles. We must stand prepared to defeat the land-seizure operations of the enemy in the east while preparing to wipe out their posts at Bu Dang, Bu Na and other places in order to expand our bases in the southeastern part of South Vietnam.

In the area of consolidating and building up our forces, we agreed on the need to overcome the prolonged imbalance between the regular and local armies. In the immediate future we must concentrate on some key provinces, especially in the Mekong River delta. The best measure was to streamline the offices and units in the rear in order to replenish and boost the local armies. We had long discussions on measures to ensure the necessary troop strength for the regular army and increase its mobility and capacity for destroying strong enemy fortifications as well as their mechanized units and air force. Training must aim to quickly raise their organisational command and combat capacity in the co-ordinated campaign by the different armed forces, and ensure the necessary strength to break through the regimental or reinforced regimental defence positions of the enemy which had the support of artillery, tanks, and air force, and even to destroy whole army groups or divisions of the enemy during mobile operations.

After careful consideration, the Ministry of Defence

decided to send 17,000 reinforcements to the B2 battlezone. With regard to local armed forces, the Ministry agreed to double their strength from 640,000 to 120,000 men and to send the first 10,000 men early in the dry season.

We also discussed another important task of strategic significance, which was to extend and fortify the transport routes from O Rang to Bu Gia Map, Bu Dop, and Loc Ninh via the northern part of Tay Ninh province, and build a new road from Bu Gia Map down to Ta Lai in Resistance Zone D. We worked out a plan to build the trunk road within two or three years and one or two side roads accessible to mechanised units in all weather conditions.

To help the Central Military Department and the Southern Command to quickly grasp the contents of the plan, right after the meeting. Le Trong Tan sent a message to Tran Do to inform him of the decisions already taken by the Central Military Committee and the Ministry with regard to the B2 battlezone. Our delegation stayed back in Hanoi to attend the 21st plenum of the Central Committee, except for Nguyen Van Linh who was instructed by the Politburo to return to South Vietnam immediately so as to prepare together with the other comrades there for the conference of the Central Military Department for South Vietnam.

Seventy days had passed since our delegation from B2 had arrived in Hanoi. During those days, through our meetings with Le Duan and the recent meeting with the leaders of the Defence Ministry, many doubts and uncertainties in our minds had been cleared up.

CHAPTER III

NEW DISPOSITION AND NEW FORCES

After the 21th plenum of the Central Committee (first round) I made preparations to return to the battlezone in order to join others in getting ready for the conference of the Central Military Department for the South, scheduled for September.

The army medical service suggested that I should have a medical check up before my departure. Over the past three months since leaving the South, I had felt completely reassured about my health. But an unexpected incident happened. The doctors told me that I had a thrombosis of which I had been unaware and I was actually suffering from kidney stones which necessitated an operation. At the proposal of the Medical Council, the Central Organizational Committee decided that I would go for treatment in the German Democratic Republic. That would take at least three months, including travelling time.

I was greatly upset and decided to ask the opinion of the members of the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee and sent a message to Pham Hung to ask his advice. Everyone counselled me to go because they said, "the fight will be long".

I spent another two weeks resolving the remaining problems concerning B2 and sent a personal message to the

Central Party Committee for the Army presenting my own views on how to implement Resolution 21 of the Central Military Department. On July 13 I left for the German Democratic Republic.

I came back in late November.

I informed the others in the Central Military Department for the South and the Military Command of the South by telegram as soon as I was back in Hanoi. The dry season had set in. I had several meetings with the various offices of the Defence Ministry and made urgent preparations to return to the South.

I was briefed by the members of the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee on the latest decisions on operational issues, on equipment and reinforcements, and on personnel work and guidelines for political and ideological work. That strengthened my confidence in the capabilities of our army and people in the South to fulfil their tasks in the dry season and the subsequent period.

In mid-December I sent a reply to Pham Hung, Tran Van Tra and Tran Do on the 1974 plan for reinforcements of the B2 battlezone.

" I have received your message asking about the number of troops and equipment the Ministry will send to B2 for the next year. The final decision of the Ministry is 26,000 reinforcements for B2.

" I am particularly happy that the General Department of Logistics and Army 559 will transport the reinforcements by mechanized means and have pledged to complete the transfer within the first three months of 1974. During the trip the troops will be fed by the supply stations of Army 359. The operation will thus be quick and the health of our troops will be better. Training of the recruits will also be better because

it will take six months. Apart from foot soldiers and technical units, the Ministry will also supply quite a large number of technicians for these units such as communications, intelligence and workers, and so on.

" I propose that you instruct the offices concerned to prepare for the timely reception and distribution so as to avoid bottlenecks.

" As for the request for personnel to form an Air Defence Command in the south as well as for a number of 57 mm anti-aircraft guns for B2, this cannot be met for the time being.

" On the request for military and civilian goods supply for this year the Central Committee will send to B2 a total of 22,000 tonnes including 12,000 tonnes of military equipment (two thirds of which comprises munitions). The General Department of Logistics hopes to complete the transportation to B2 in the first four months of 1974. The question of ammunition for 57 mm anti-aircraft guns and A72 guns cannot be solved at present. I have asked for more anti-aircraft guns and recoilless guns of the 82 mm calibre type and this request has been approved.

"I would like also to inform you and the other members of the Central Military Department for the South about my health. On December 5 the Medical Council made another diagnosis and concluded that I need some more time for treatment of my cardiovascular problem. I have asked the doctors to try to stabilize my health condition so that I might leave for the South in February before the Lunar New Year. I will strictly follow Comrade Pham Hung's instructions on medical treatment."

Since I planned to arrive in the South before the Lunar New Year festival I made good provision for New Year gifts and sent them in advance so that I could travel light.

At the end of January 1974, when everything was ready, I made a round to say good-bye to the leaders and to my friends at the various military offices. But once again I was frustrated in my attempts to leave. When I went to see Le Duc Tho, he surprised me by telling me that the Politburo and Central Organizing Committee had decided to keep me in the North. I asked with great consternation why.

"The Medical Council has suggested that we should not let you go in your present condition when you have just had a major operation and your cardiovascular system has not stabilized completely."

"Please let me go and I promise to be very careful about my health."

"We know that you have made every preparation but the doctors have recently discovered that your condition has not quite stabilized. If we let you go, we would long regret it should something happen. Stay here and return to the General Staff, and prepare for the final stage. The Central Military Committee and the General Staff need more personnel to help the Politburo and the Central Committee."

I knew that any further insistence would be in vain because it had been decided by both the Politburo and the Central Organizing Committee. It had also been decided that Tran Van Tra would replace me as commander of the B2 front. I parted with Le Duc Tho with a heavy heart as I thought of all those meetings and heated discussions with the comrades in the South, of all that we had differed on and agreed upon in the hectic preparation for our last test of strength with the enemy.

I sat for three hours writing an eight-page letter to Pham Hung and the others in the South. It was a report and also an outpouring of my innermost feelings.

I later went to see Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung. They told me that the Politburo had decided to appoint me as first deputy chief of the General Staff. They also asked me to take direct charge of supply to the B2 front and assume operational leadership.

Thus I returned to my old job and old friends. I decided to put aside all my personal grievances and to buckle down to work immediately.

By this time the General Staff was concentrating on directing the battle front during the dry season campaign. Envoys were sent from different battlezones to report on the situation in their areas and make suggestions as to direction for 1974 in line with Resolution 21 of the Central Committee.

I spent much time listening to the department and envoys. I also met with Song Hao and Dinh Duc Thien ⁽¹⁹⁾ with whom I discussed the common tasks of the Ministry of Defence in implementation of Resolution 21.

Also on this occasion, Le Duc Anh, commander of the 9th Military Zone, came to Hanoi to report to the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. At our own request, he spent four days reporting to the General Staff and together with us discussed experiences from the 9th Military Zone since the beginning of 1973. In fact, these experiences were a very valuable asset for the General Staff.

Even before the signing of the Paris Agreement, on January 2, 1973, the enemy had sent its 21st Division to southwestern Long My, and other forces to occupy territory in our liberated zone. The army and people of the 9th Military Zone, while fighting against the enemy's land-seizure operations, reorganized their forces in anticipation of the "opportunity strategy" in line with instructions from the Central Military Department for South Vietnam and the

Southern Military Command. After a week they had defeated the enemy operation and liberated more land in Long My and Phung Hiep.

In March, the same 21st Infantry Division, supported by the 9th "Cavalry Regiment", launched the first drive of a major attack on Chuong Thien aimed at capturing our liberated zone in southwestern Long My and forming an interdiction corridor from Ngang Dua to Vinh Cheo, isolating U Minh ⁽²⁰⁾ and driving us out of this vital area. Guided by the February 3 Resolution of the Standing Regional Party Committee, the local army and people fought very bravely and foiled this enemy operation against Chuong Thien.

On July 6, the enemy launched the second drive of the campaign but again were pushed back by the local army and people. Ten days later, the enemy mustered more than 60 infantry battalions, four river fleets and four groups of M113 army personnel carriers to launch a major, long-term operation in an attempt to reoccupy the Ba Ho and Lai Hieu areas. Holding on to their battlefield and closely co-ordinating the three types of armed forces, the army and people in the 9th Military Zone launched a bitter counterattack, picking off the enemy on the main battlefield while forcing them to deploy their forces to cope with our attacks on other battlefields. Over a period of two and half months, from June 15 to August 30, 1973, the army and people of the 9th Military Zone fought more than 200 battles, putting out of action more than 5,000 enemy troops, defeating this biggest ever land-seizure attack into Chuong Thien and successfully defending the U Minh resistance base.

As we saw it, the main lessons that could be drawn from the fight in Chuong Thien would be the following :

To stick to the battlefield, quickly change leadership and strategy, accurately evaluate the enemy's strategy and

tactics, resolutely counterattack against the enemy, apply the correct method of and tactics in the struggle, closely combine the different forces and localities, and fight the enemy relentlessly so they could not concentrate their forces for any major counteroffensive and would finally have to abandon their strategy after sustaining too heavy losses.

Le Duc Anh also briefed us about the situation in the 8th Military Zone where by the end of 1973 we had basically recovered areas lost to the enemy since the end of January 1973 south and north of Highway 4, such as the "July 20" area (Cai Lay, south of Highway 4, liberated on July 20, 1963) and Ben Tre and Kien Tuong provinces. In Ben Tre in particular, we had liberated more land in northern and southern Mo Cay and Giong Trom, forcing the enemy to abandon more than 50 posts. We had recaptured 126 hamlets with 45,000 inhabitants. In My Tho we recovered four areas, and liberated six communes and 12 hamlets with nearly 90,000 inhabitants.

On the strength of these conclusions, I, Le Trong Tan, Cao Van Khanh and the heads of the Combat Operations and Militia Departments unanimously proposed that the Ministry of Defence convene a conference to discuss experiences in the fight against the enemy's pacification campaign. We suggested that the conference be held in May. Our proposal was accepted and the Militia and Combat Operations Departments were delegated to make preparations.

Meanwhile, the secretary of the Party Military Committee for the Army, Vo Nguyen Giap, informed us that the committee would hold a conference in March to review the military situation and would issue a resolution on the major tasks to be undertaken to implement Resolution 21, in particular specifying guidelines for action in the near future. We agreed to assign Le Trong Tan to the preparation of a

plan to be submitted to Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung and the other leaders on the General Staff before it was presented to the conference of the Party Military Committee.

In our discussions of the Central Military Committee's draft resolution our greatest concern was about what the General Staff could do to help the Party Military Committee and Politburo work out our strategy before the onset of the 1974 - 75 dry season. A series of strategic tasks being implemented now needed to be accelerated so that they could essentially be completed by the end of 1974. We needed to step up our military activities in the last months of the 1973 - 74 dry season campaign and also in the current rainy season in order to strengthen our position. We needed to complete the first drive and begin the second stage of the transport campaign for the front. We needed to strengthen the local armies in the South, improve the strategic supply roads and take the gasoline pipeline further south, and to build and refine supply stations along the Truong Son route and roads inside the liberated areas. We needed to complete the army recruitment drive for 1974 and the first drive for 1975, and strengthen the regular army, especially the strategic mobile forces from the North including technical units. We needed to review the first military training programme, begin the second part of the programme, and so on.

If these tasks could be accomplished we would be able not only to increase our strength in both zones of the country to win still greater victories in the coming dry season, but also to lay the essential foundations for implementation of the "opportunity strategy" to liberate South Vietnam completely.

My discussions with Le Trong Tan and Cao Van Khanh and others in the general departments at the Ministry and the General Staff, as well as those with the envoys from the battlefronts, had enlightened me on many vital questions.

In 1973 the enemy had made major efforts and achieved a number of incontestable results. They had seized from us nearly 400 hamlets, set up more than 700 new military posts, kept the Saigon army and administration from disintegrating, and consolidated the areas under their control, especially in the plains in the 5th Zone. But they had not achieved their main objective of eliminating the "leopard skin" situation. Since September they had been repulsed in the 9th Zone and checked in the 8th Zone even though they had captured a number of areas in the 5th Zone.

The Saigon army had been substantially strengthened thanks to American aid. Its troop strength had increased (trebled in the case of the local armies). The Saigon army could fight a small and medium-scale war but could not cope with a major offensive on our part like the one in 1972.

Nguyễn Văn Thieu had further consolidated the puppet administration. In particular he had militarized his control at the grassroots. But this administration was seriously isolated politically and was encountering growing economic problems. Most notable was the plunging morale of the puppet army which was stretched thinly over a wide battlefield. Where we exerted strong pressure, such as the Mekong River delta, the puppet army showed visible passivity and bewilderment.

The United States was encountering serious difficulties domestically and internationally. Conflict within the country had taken new dimensions. Although it had not abandoned its strategy against South Vietnam, it could no longer interfere freely as it had previously.

For our part, the central task was to foil the enemy pacification and land-seizure programme. The struggle to win over the population from the enemy had become

extremely bitter, especially in the 5th and 8th Zones. The population living in areas under our control was estimated at 4 million, among them 1.2 million in liberated zones.

Militarily speaking, we had successfully applied the strategy of resisting enemy land-seizure while secretly moving our forces into enemy-controlled areas. The people's war had been considerably intensified, especially since August 1973.

The casualty ratio was one to five in our favour. But this was still too high.

The local armies had been reorganized and strengthened especially in the Mekong River delta.

In the past year, North Vietnam had sent to the South nearly 100,000 troops, helping to boost the troop strength of each battalion to 350 or 400 men. This enabled units to devote more time to training. The local armed forces were also expanded but did not yet come up to expectations. Technical units (artillery, anti-aircraft defence, tanks and so on) had all been strengthened. By the end of 1973 we had been able to store in the area south of the Ho Chi Minh Trail 15,000 tonnes of munitions but their transportation to the battlefields in the 6th, 8th and 9th Zones and the southern part of the 5th Zone still encountered serious difficulties.

Progress had also been made in consolidating the liberated zones and resistance bases in the mountain areas as well as in support for the revolutions in Laos and Cambodia.

From an analysis of the situation I suggested to the other members of the General Staff that it was important to overcome the following weaknesses :

– On the military side, our local armies, militia and guerrillas in the South still fell short of the requirements for the strategic task.

- On the political side, the movement in the towns had not developed to the desired level, our cells at the grassroots were still small and the revolutionary forces along the corridors linking the bases were not strong enough. The legal struggle of the Third Force needed to be intensified.

Military supplies to the South remained inadequate. We proposed to the General Logistics Department a programme of military supply for operations in 1974 and several subsequent years on the assumption that we would conduct medium-sized battles in 1975 and major battles in 1976, and also an alternative programme in case artillery shells were in short supply.

I discussed these matters with Vo Nguyen Giap, Van Tien Dung and others before Le Trong Tan presented the draft military plan to the General Staff.

At a conference of the Party Military Committee in March Le Trong Tan, on behalf of the General Staff, presented the draft military plan.

The conference later issued a resolution, the main points of which were as follows. On strategic policy in the next few years the Party Military Committee had decided that :

1. The number one task was to inflict a crushing blow on the enemy's pacification and land-seizure operations and their plan to draw boundaries between areas under our and their control to win over the population, and establish our control in the plains and on the fringes of the towns.

2. To step by step take the political struggle in the towns to a higher level and at the same time make all necessary preparations to intensify it into a mass revolutionary tide.

3. The main force should fight and consolidate its strength at the same time in order to gradually increase its capacity in annihilation battles while standing ready to cope with any new counter-move by the enemy.

4. To consolidate, defend and extend the liberated zones and resistance bases in the South while striving to restore and develop the economy in the North, to build up the North in terms of both economy and defence capability, ready to defeat any enemy strategy.

All this was aimed at changing the balance of forces in our favour and creating conditions for seizing the opportunity to deal three powerful blows (the main force, the struggle in the countryside and the movement in the towns) in order to change the situation quickly and suddenly before the enemy could react, and with the ultimate goal of winning the biggest victory for the revolution.

To implement these policies, the Party Military Committee placed emphasis on the following :

1- The urgent and also fundamental requirement in the next few years was to win over the population from the enemy and regain control over the plains, liberate and firmly defend the mountain areas, form small liberated pockets right in enemy-controlled zones, and step by step seize control of the towns, develop the position and strength of the revolution in the South, and weaken the enemy while boosting our own forces.

2- To keep a firm grasp of the idea of offensive strategy, be resolved to attack the enemy, and maintain and expand our initiative in all fields. To apply appropriate guidelines and methods at different times and in different regions.

– On the densely-populated plains where the enemy were conducting their "pacification" and land-seizure operations, we must use offensive and counter-offensive to defeat them, regarding offensive as the main tactic and the contested and enemy-controlled areas as objective in order to gradually transform the contested areas into liberated zones

and the areas under enemy control into contested or liberated areas.

- In mountain regions, we must also use offensive and counter-offensive to defeat the enemy's land-seizure operations, at the same time attacking and destroying the remaining posts of the enemy and expanding the liberated zone.

- In enemy-held areas, we must attack airports, warehouses and other enemy logistical bases, the starting points for their operations and their main supply routes.

3- To closely combine different forms of activity :

- To maintain and develop people's warfare in the densely populated and rich Mekong delta, to combine medium-scale and small -scale warfare, and fight continuously and extensively, aimed chiefly at foiling enemy pacification and land-seizure operations;

- To intensify the medium and large-scale operations of the main force in order to wipe out part of the enemy's main force, and to combine actions by the main force with other military forces in the Mekong River delta. The main force must combine fighting with consolidation, being ready to engage in major battles when the occasion offers.

- To intensify the movement in urban areas in order to form a real encirclement around the towns, especially Saigon.

We should make much bigger efforts and generally combine the above-mentioned forms of struggle in order to deal the three powerful blows (countryside, rural areas and army main force). When the strategic opportunity offers, when the balance of forces has changed essentially in our favour, when the United States faces serious difficulties both domestically and internationally and when we have made the necessary preparations, we should decide how to act in the light of practical conditions in order to win important victories.

The conference of the Party Military Committee also decided on a number of major tasks aimed at implementing the strategic policy in this new situation directed towards battle on a large scale : to strengthen the armed forces, especially strategic mobile reserve forces, the North should speed up economic restoration and consolidation while sending more materiel and men to the South, and special attention should be paid to political and ideological education, and to organizational and training work aimed at constantly improving the fighting capacity of all the types of armed forces.

While disseminating information on the resolution of the Party Military Committee among the main officers in the various departments of the General Staff I took care to clarify the details of the major tasks which needed special attention so that we might gain a new position and strength before entering a new dry season.

In building up the armed forces, the General Staff should pay attention to building up the strategic mobile reserve force into strong divisions and army corps, trained well enough to be capable of conducting large-scale joint operations among the different services, boosting the strength of battalions and regiments, sending more troops to the battlefield as on – the – spot reserves, and strengthening the local armies by half as much again and even to double the present level.

Along with actively building and consolidating the liberated zones and resistance bases in the South, the General Staff, in collaboration with the General Logistics Department and Army Corps 559, should strive to improve the supply route west of the Truong Son range and open a new route on the east, build more storehouses and liaison stations on these roads in order to meet the needs of the

eventual large-scale battles, and together with the Battlefront Communications Command, discussed a plan to establish direct telephone links from the battlefields to the offices of the Ministry of Defence.

In the North, the main task was to concentrate on consolidating the 4th Zone, especially its southern part. All provinces must carry out an effective campaign of mobilisation of the army and also air defence work especially in key military, economic and political areas.

After the March 1974 Resolution of the Military Central Committee was approved by the Politburo, the General Staff expeditiously communicated it to the various military zones in the South. At the end of April 1974, the Military Central Committee convened a conference of high-ranking military officers from throughout the army (chiefly in the North) to study and implement the resolution.

Almost all the leaders from the military zones, armed services and army corps, the general departments and important army sections, gathered at the guesthouse of the Ministry of Defence at 33 Pham Ngu Lao Street, Hanoi.

I had mixed feelings of joy and anxiety. I was enthusiastic because the conference reached complete unanimity on the resolution, but I was anxious because too much remained to be done and time was running out. While the front was making hectic preparations for the coming major battles, the rear had to accomplish a series of formidable tasks such as recruitment, training of the army for future large-scale battles, building and expanding strategic routes to the South, ensuring good logistical arrangements with regard to food and technical equipment, summing up the experience gained from the fighting, and consolidating and training personnel so as not to miss the strategic opportunity. To better under-

stand the realities and create conditions for the accomplishment of the tasks assigned, to go to the units and localities became an imperative need for me.

It had been ten years since I had left the battlefield and so many new questions had arisen which I needed to study in order to learn the necessary lessons in combat leadership. Also I needed to research the lessons drawn from countering the destructive US air war.

In April and May most of my time was spent on trips to different localities and army units. I hoped thereby to make some contribution to the army's general strategic plan for the next few years. Everywhere I went I saw the same commitment and readiness to do everything for the front.

The Air Defence and Air Force Command briefed me about its experiences in the use of the air force and surface-to-air missiles. I was particularly impressed by the newly-acquired SAM - 3 missiles. During the previous fight against the US Air Force, we had only had older generation missiles.

At navy headquarters I was briefed on the ways in which our men had organized clandestine supply trips by sea to the South and also some of the most successful battles waged by our special maritime force. I discussed with them the possibility of using the Saigon navy after defeating the enemy over the whole of South Vietnam.

I could see that our artillery strength in the South had been considerably boosted, and that we already had brigades of large-calibre and long-range artillery. It would be one of our biggest trump cards in the coming major battles.

I also visited the Special Forces and armoured troops.

I felt reassured by the high level of commitment and the efficient preparations being undertaken in all services and units. One thing that still concerned me was the scarcity of

ammunition for our artillery. As it was, the whole of our reserve forces had only a little more than 100,000 large calibre cannon shells. Meanwhile, ammunition stores in the North had almost run out. How would we launch sustained major battles, especially against an enemy dug in solid fortifications and the towns? I decided to report on this matter to the Central Military Committee for the Army and the General Logistics Department so that they might be able to find a quick solution.

What most concerned me during my trip to the military regions on both sides of the Red River was the question of troop recruitment. The mobilisation of manpower in these areas over the last few years had been exceptionally good. For instance, the Left Bank Military Zone, which then had a population of more than seven million, had over a ten-year period (1964 - 1973) supplied the army with nearly 560,000 young men, or roughly 8 per cent of the population.

I thought of the demand for manpower in the coming years. How would we meet requirements for these major battles at a time when on-the-spot mobilization in the South would remain limited for some time to come. We also needed to strengthen the battle for the population in enemy-controlled areas in order to boost our capacity for on-the-spot mobilization of resources and manpower in anticipation of the great "opportunity strategy" to liberate the South completely.

In the 4th Military Zone I was heartened by the placement of our artillery on the shore by both the regular army and local militia.

I called at the headquarters of the 1st Army Corps. This was the first army corps founded in October the previous year. Its creation bore witness to the far-sightedness of our Party. Lessons from the years 1971 and 1972 showed that the

way of organizing and utilizing independent divisions or division-sized amalgamated units was no longer appropriate and a need had arisen for dealing heavier blows through the use of units larger than division size if we were to strike mortal blows at an enemy stronger in both troop numbers and equipment. This task actually fell to the army corps of the reserve force which was well equipped, armed with substantial fire-power and with a high degree of mobility. It was no accident that the 1st Army Corps comprised the first units of the regular forces of the People's Army of Vietnam : Infantry Division 308 and the mechanised Artillery Regiment 45. During the resistance against the French, Division 308 was feared by the aggressors. In fact, the presence of Division 308 usually heralded a major battle. The French called it the "Division of Steel". For our part, the army called it the "Vanguard Division". As for Regiment 45, it had been awarded the title "Determined to Win".

By now, under the guidance of Tran Van Quang, the Operations and Militia Departments had completed a report summing up experience gained from countering the enemy's pacification campaign. This report, together with an earlier report by Le Duc Anh on experiences on this score gained by the army and people in the 9th Military Zone, had helped the General Staff compile a more comprehensive report to be submitted to the forthcoming conference. The report was presented to Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung. Afterwards a conference to review experience gained in countering the enemy's pacification campaign was convened in late May 1974. Delegates from various battlezones in South Vietnam contributed very varied and valuable experiences in this domain. The underlying lessons from this conference could be summed up as follows:

-To have a firm grasp of the concept of revolutionary violence and offensive strategy.

-To ensure a high degree of combat-readiness for the army at all times

-To constantly strengthen Party grassroots organisations as a basis for developing the mass movement and militia and guerrilla forces

-To detect in good time the enemy's strategy at each point in time, especially at turning points in the war.

-To use slogans and forms of struggle appropriate to the situation in each locality.

-To continuously apply the strength of the political and military forces and the three prongs of attack – the towns, countryside and mountain areas – and to take the initiative in attacking and counterattacking the enemy.

A crucial task of the General Staff before we entered a new dry season on the battlefield was to complete the fundamental operational plan to be submitted to the Central Party Committee for the Army.

Right after the Central Committee issued Resolution 21 and the Central Military Committee issued its resolution of October 1973, the Organising Group of the Combat Operations Department had drawn up a strategic operational plan entitled "Operational Directions for 1973 - 1975" as a basis for preparing for the conference of the Central Military Committee in March 1974. In May 1974 the Operations Department drew up a draft programme for a Comprehensive Plan for winning victory in the South.

After studying this draft programme and making the necessary modifications in the light of the military situation, on July 18, 1974 the Commander-in-Chief, basing himself on guidelines from the Politburo, instructed me and the Combat

Operations Department to re-write the draft in order to , present it to the Politburo in late September.

The Commander-in-Chief made the following observations and suggestions in drawing up the fundamental strategic plan :

1. We should revise the whole situation prevailing on the military front since the end of 1973. Thanks to our efforts both on the battlefield and in the rear, we had achieved a new position and strength on the battlefield. It was necessary to point out and analyze the new factors as a basis for charting our strategic plan.

2. On the basis of the initial change in the balance of forces on the battlefield, it was necessary to work out a two-stage fundamental strategy.

The first stage aimed to radically change the balance of forces on the battlefield in our favour. At the same time, we should be stronger than the enemy politically, and would control the major part of the countryside and mountain areas and thus create the possibility of forming a coalition government.

In the second stage, we should intensify the fight and launch a general offensive and general insurrection in order to win complete victory.

3. Where should we start the strategic battle? We should study both possibilities, either the Central Highlands or the eastern part of South Vietnam, both being of strategic significance and decisive for the coming liberation fight as a whole. The main theatre should be the eastern part of South Vietnam but we should start the strategic battle only when conditions were right. In both theatres we had to adopt effective diversionary tactics in order to take the enemy by surprise while keeping from revealing our strength too soon. In the immediate future, main force operations should be kept at a moderate level.

4. It was necessary to adopt a specific plan for the North in conjunction with the plan for the South. Here, efforts should be concentrated in two areas: mobilizing reinforcements for the South in term of both manpower and technical equipment and making every preparation to cope with the possible resumption of the air war of destruction and also to cope with an eventual landing of enemy troops on the coast in the 4th Military Zone.

5. On the build-up of forces to concentrate on boosting combat capacity, rationalise organisational arrangements within the army, determine the right balance between the different armed forces and services in the light of combat realities and the practical potential of future army recruitment, and to intensively train army officers in anticipation of the coming tasks.

6. On the method of fighting, we needed to communicate more widely and effectively on experiences gained from the recent fight against the enemy's pacification campaign, and to study the experiences of main force units in their attacks on enemy military subsectors, districts, township and enemy battle groups and experience in organizing large units for major co-ordinated battles.

7. To work out a plan combining national defence with economic development including organisation of the army to take part in economic construction and preparation for restoration of the railway from the 4th Military Zone southward.

Van Tien Dung was on a trip abroad to improve his health. Le Trong Tan, myself and other deputy chiefs of the General Staff discussed with departmental heads from the General Staff and General Logistics Department the situation over the past half year. The question remained as to how to establish a new position and new strength on the bat-

tlefront as a basis for drawing up the strategic plan for the next few years.

The most conspicuous event in the 1973 - 74 dry season was a substantial change in the balance of forces and an initial change in the battlefield situation in our favour.

As could be seen from documents captured from the enemy they were being very ambitious in their pacification and land-seizure strategy as well as in their program to build up the Saigon army and restore the economy. But reality in the first half of 1974 had proved that these were only wishful thinking.

True, the enemy's army remained strong in terms of numbers, and they had quite an impressive artillery force and a fairly complex defensive system in the countryside which enabled them to control many densely populated areas and mobilize resources and manpower for the war effort. But on the operational plane, their weaknesses were showing up more and more clearly. Since March 1974, in particular, when we launched a series of counter-attacks, the enemy's passivity had become obvious on all battlefronts even though they could still mobilize a large force. They were facing increasing contradictions between the plan to launch major forces in pacification and land-seizure operations and their limited capacity for counter-attack when coming up against stiff resistance on our part. The morale of enemy troops was visibly dwindling, especially where our forces struck hard. In most cases, the defenders abandoned their positions, the "civil guards" and militia being first to do so. During the first months of each year the enemy concentrated their forces on staging major land-seizure operations in western Son Tinh, western Tu Nghia, eastern Mo Duc, northwestern Duc Pho and the 4th sector of Kien Tuong province. But they failed to

achieve their goals for the first half of 1974. We captured two and even three times the number of posts lost to or set up by the enemy. The enemy-controlled area shrank visibly. The pacification and land-seizure campaign which the enemy considered the pinnacle of their strategic plan was in danger of collapse.

On the build-up of forces, in spite of the enemy's utmost efforts to pressgang young men into the army in an attempt to keep their troop strength at 1973 levels and strengthen their military set-up at grassroots level, the demoralisation of the puppet army was easily detectable. The desertion rate had increased rapidly and troop numbers were in danger of falling below the 1973 level. Most of their main force and local army battalions were under strength. Their mobile strategic forces, already depleted, had become even more inadequate since the bulk of them were bottled up in the 1st Tactical Zone (Saigon).

Even more noteworthy was the depletion of the Saigon army's equipment. Although it remained substantial, its utilisation rate was very low partly due to shortages of spare parts and technical personnel (the number of pilots in particular could meet only 30 per cent of requirements). The amount of artillery ammunition used on the battlefield in the first half of 1974 dropped by a factor of nine compared with the same period of 1973. The quantity of fuel used dropped by more than a half compared with 1972. Out of a total of 1,800 aircraft only 1,100 were operational.

This situation had directly affected the morale and activities of the Saigon army on the battlefield. This explained why in June 1974 Nguyen Van Thieu had to call on his army to "fight in the way of the poor" (!)

The US economy was facing enormous difficulties due to the Vietnam war. The impact of the reduction in US aid

had begun to be felt in the economy of South Vietnam. The Saigon budget deficit in the 1973 fiscal year grew to 168 billion South Vietnamese piastres (or 37 per cent of the budget). In the 1974 fiscal year, even though Nguyen Van Thieu had issued 200 billion more piastres, there was still a shortfall of 98 billion or 18 per cent of the budget. Industrial activity dropped by more than 40 per cent, and the area under cultivation by 30 - 40 per cent.

For our part, since early 1974, all battlefronts had operated more vigorously and evenly. In both zones of the country, we were making serious preparations in all areas aimed at achieving a new position and a new strength on the eve of the dry season of 1974 - 75.

Since the beginning of spring 1973 we had launched many counter-offensives and step by step regained areas lost to the enemy on all battlezones - the 5th Military Zone, the Central Highlands and South Vietnam proper. In many areas we had even expanded the liberated zones by hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. In particular, on the western Nam Bo battlefront, within only three months (from April to June 1974) the army and people of the 9th Military Zone had destroyed or forced the abandonment of nearly 600 enemy posts.

Meanwhile in the towns, the political struggle and guerrilla warfare deep behind enemy lines were also being intensified although not to a level necessary to keep pace with the armed struggle. On the whole, by mid 1974 the situation on both the political and military planes had changed clearly in our favour. Basically, we had gained the strategic initiative and a firm foothold from which to develop our activities in most of the important strategic areas.

In the expanded liberated zones, the people enjoyed a better life and better security. The resident population and

those who returned from other places were both eager to produce food for their own needs and those of the resistance. The cultivated area in regions under our control had increased compared with 1974 (in the 8th Military Zone in particular, it went up by 13,000 hectares). Nevertheless, the purchase of food was still inadequate, achieving only 40 per cent of the annual plan.

Important results had also been obtained in the building up of the armed forces in both zones of the country, especially in the refining of the strategic reserves. Following the creation of the 1st Army Corps (October 1973) two more army corps had been formed, namely the 2nd Army Corps in Tri Thien (May 1974) and the 4th Army Corps of South Vietnam (July 1974).

Thus we now had potentially powerful strategic punches, ready to deal decisive blows when the opportunity offered. One thing that still worried the General Staff was how to fulfil the programme of troop recruitment and develop the local armies in the South.

The consolidation and extension of the strategic transport routes from east to west of the Truong Son Range was carried out in earnest especially after the 21st plenum of the Party Central Committee which aimed to prepare for a large-scale military campaign.

The halt in enemy bombing of Lao territory and the dry season, which began in late 1973 and continued through the first half of 1974, created favourable conditions for us to accelerate the building and consolidating of parallel roads on the east and west of the Truong Son as well as side roads, detours and smaller roads for infantry and pipelines deep into contested areas. In all, we had widened and strengthened 5,920 kilometres of trunk road, 3,930 kilometres of side roads and 4,830 kilometres of detours which altogether could ensure the movement of mechanized units in all weathers.

The road building program had enabled large-scale transportation of reinforcements and supplies to the battlefield. The plan was to complete the whole program of transport to the battlefields in the Central Highlands, Nam Bo, Laos and Cambodia in the first half of 1974.

In the first drive of the campaign between November 1973 and May 1974 the strategic logistics office and Army 559 achieved 105 per cent and 169 per cent of their respective plans, totalling nearly 100,000 troops together with 25 armoured columns and artillery groups and hundreds of thousands of tonnes of military and civilians equipment to the South, and evacuate almost all the sick and wounded soldiers to the North. Plans had been worked out to transport more than half a million tonnes of reserve supplies over the next few years.

The second phase of the transport campaign was also carried out at high speed and led to prospects of overfulfilment of requirements as regards South Vietnam as well as Laos and Cambodia.

On the North - South route, from south of Highway 9 to eastern Nam Bo, a series of new supply stations and logistical bases had taken shape. The two parallel routes east and west of the Truong Son Range, like two parallel arteries, linked the North and South.

In the building and extension of the Truong Son supply route we had taken into account both short-term and long-term needs, combining the immediate needs of battle on a large scale with an overall plan for economic development and national defence and the discharge of our international duty.

In 1973 we had sent 100,000 reinforcements to the South. In the first half of 1974 nearly 80,000 more were added. As a result, many units on the battlefronts had attained the re-

quired troop strength (from 400 to 500 for each battalion, from 1,800 to 2,000 for a regiment and from 300 to 500 for a local army battalion) and eventually brought troop strength for our army on the southern battlefield to approximately 400,000 and the strength of our regular force to almost the same level as the regular forces of the Saigon army.

The most noteworthy aspect of the transport of troops in early 1974 was the fact that we had reduced to a minimum the rate of illness during the journey while completing the delivery of troops at the earliest possible date as compared with any previous season. The rate of troop delivery was 99.3 per cent compared to 91.8 per cent for the same period in 1973. For many battalions, all the troops arrived safe and sound at their destinations in the South. The quality of recruits was also better and the force structure also more varied, including units from the various armed services which had been carefully trained and could take part in a major co-ordinated action.

Meanwhile, in the North, the population had achieved miraculous things in the healing of the wounds caused by two air wars of destruction. Gross national product in 1973 was higher than in 1965. In particular, the value of industrial output increased by nearly 12 per cent over that of 1972.

The North also had sent large amounts of material, equipment and manpower to the South to help in economic rehabilitation and cultural development in the liberated zones.

With regard to military strategy the General Staff had also matured in the use of appropriate methods in the fight against the enemy. Most valuable were lessons drawn from the fight against the enemy's large-scale pacification campaign, "Operation Phoenix" which the enemy considered the central task of the Saigon army in 1974.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRATEGIC PLAN

After having gathered the necessary information to work out and perfect our basic strategic plan, together with the Organising Group of the Combat Operations Department, we revised the various draft plans prepared earlier. The first question was, taking into account the objective situation and our actual capabilities, when should we launch the final assault and how would we create the element of strategic surprise and win the decisive battle?

There had been similar circumstances in past years. Once every four years, around the time of the presidential election in the United States, we had launched a major offensive throughout the whole of the South Vietnam battlefield (1968 and 1972). Should 1976 be chosen for the next general offensive? Some objected to such timing because, they said, the enemy would take pre-emptive action. But if we decided to act earlier, i.e. as early as 1975, would we have enough time for preparation? On the other hand, if we decided to act later, in 1977 for instance, would it be too late? The point was how to create the strategic opportunity and seize it when it arose. We must step up our preparations if we wanted the opportunity to occur at the desired point in time.

As discussions were proceeding, the Office of the Party Central Committee informed us on July 20 that Le Duan,

who was on vacation at Do Son beach, had asked us to come and discuss the situation and the tasks ahead. The note added that we should take along all the necessary maps. We understood this to be a meeting to discuss the strategic plan which was at the centre of Politburo deliberations and part of the preparations for the coming September meeting. Le Trong Tan, Vo Quang Ho, deputy chief of the Operations Department, and I went to Do Son. Vo Quang Ho acted as minutes secretary for meetings of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. We used separate cars and left at different times to avoid enemy detection. As it was, in the last years of the war, agents planted by other countries kept a close eye on the movement of key officers from the General Staff.

Before we left Vo Nguyen Giap gave his own assessments and observations so that we could report them to Le Duan.

We arrived at Do Son on the morning of July 21.

We had guessed right. Le Duan wanted us to have a free exchange of views with him during the drawing up of the strategic plan. He wanted to hear our views and to impart his own before we could finalize our report to the meeting of the Politburo. He raised three major issues:

- 1/ Assessing the enemy situation and our own both past and present, in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia;
- 2/ The strategic direction for 1975 and subsequent years in the South;
- 3/ The question of building up and defending the North.

We reported to Le Duan on what had been done and the experience of the past few months, especially in the fight

against the enemy's pacification campaign. We reported on preparations for the Thuong Duc battle in the 5th Military Zone and the second drive of Army Corps 559's strategic transportation campaign, which was due to conclude in September 1974. We also reported on various aspects of strategic preparations such as road building, the building of logistical bases in Tri Thien, the Central Highlands, the 5th Military Zone, and Nam Bo, the results of the army recruitment drive, the first military training programme and the quantity of supplies sent from the North over the past year.

Everything was geared towards large-scale concerted actions by the different armed services in the South.

Before making a detailed report to Le Duan on the political movement in the towns and localities, especially the struggle to win over the population from the enemy in the Mekong River delta and the summer military campaign in the 5th Military Zone in co-ordination with the Central Highlands battlefield, we gave him an overview of the military situation with the help of military maps showing where we had fought most successfully against the enemy's land-seizure operations.

We laid special stress on the political struggle inside Saigon. A new development there was the united action by nearly 200 trade unions from different sectors and circles within the General Labour Union to fight against lay-offs and acts of violence by American servicemen. However, because the enemy had intensified their machine of repression the political movement inside Saigon and on its fringes remained weak.

Meanwhile, in the Mekong River delta we had quickly boosted our position and strength. In the 8th Military Zone, although we had not yet been able to recover all our territory

in the 4th Sector in Kien Tuong province, we had expelled the enemy from the centre of the Plain of Reeds and liberated many new enclaves in My Tho, Ben Tre, Sa Dec and An Giang. In particular, we had disrupted enemy attempts to establish settlements in the Plain of Reeds and expanded our control over most parts of Cho Gao. Our military successes were most obvious in the 9th Military Zone. Within six months, we had put out of action 41,000 enemy troops (including 11,000 deserters), five battalions, 50 companies, an army corps, and one river fleet, decimated six battalions and one river fleet, destroyed 148 military vehicles including 83 M 113 armoured personnel carriers, sank 78 ships, destroyed 59 artillery pieces, and overrun 228 military posts and forced the surrender of nine others. We had also forced the evacuation of 562 posts and provoked mutinies in eight others. Of the 807 posts destroyed by us the enemy were able to reoccupy only 330. We had liberated 312 hamlets (including seven communes) with 280,000 inhabitants, bringing the population of liberated and contested areas to 1,110,000.

This was a firm basis on which to assert that the enemy had failed in their plan to extend their control to populated areas especially in the vicinity of Saigon and in the Mekong River delta. We continued to exercise firm control in the resistance bases and guerrilla enclaves in eastern Nam Bo and around Saigon and had regained almost all territory lost to the enemy since the signing of the Paris Agreement, and had even expanded the liberated zones in Go Cong, Cho Gao, My Tho, Bac Lieu and Soc Trang. The heartland of the Plain of Reeds had been linked up with the liberated areas north and south of Highway 4, as well as with resistance bases in U Minh and Nam Can and the four provinces along the Hau River (Can Tho, Rach Gia, Soc Trang and Ca Mau).

One thing was certain: we had strengthened our position throughout the recent dry season and the enemy was going downhill. Consequently, we might achieve even bigger successes in the coming wet season.

Whatever the circumstances, we had to overcome difficulties caused by the weather in order to further enhance our position on the battlefield so as to gain greater victories during the dry season of 1974-75.

We also reported on the implementation of Resolution 21 of the Military Committee and the March 1974 Resolution of the Central Military Committee and the fact that these resolutions had been warmly welcomed by all local administrative and military commanders.

The most hotly debated questions in the implementation of the resolutions were how to apply the forms of struggle appropriate to the conditions existing in each region and how to quickly build up our political and armed forces in the localities. Throughout several summer months, the capacity of our armed forces had improved noticeably compared with the early months of the year.

With the wholehearted support of the people and effective assistance from various State bodies, the Ministry of Defence and Army Corps 559 in particular, we had completed the transport programme and road construction plan on time including many roads reaching deep into the battle zones. The conference which aimed to draw lessons from experience gained in countering the enemy's pacification strategy and was convened by the General Staff, had shed light on many questions relating to methods of and tactics for the struggle, especially in the co-ordination of three-pronged attacks in communes and hamlets.

Le Duan asked us to study further ways of speeding up the disintegration of the enemy's administrative apparatus. On the plains, what should be the scale of the force to be used – a brigade or a division? In Saigon, where the enemy had concentrated their elite forces, how would we create pockets of resistance so that we could gain a firm foothold?

Le Duan revealed his thinking about questions related to the strategic plan and strategic opportunity. He drew particular attention to the world situation and that pertaining in Southeast Asia, which had a direct bearing on our resistance war in South Vietnam. He said, " The Vietnam issue must be placed within the context of the whole of Indochina and Southeast Asia. Earlier, we believed that the US troop commitment to South Vietnam was primarily aimed at boosting the US strategy of encircling the socialist camp in the Far East. Today, it has become clear that it is not the United States alone but many other countries which are trying to gain influence in this area".

At one time these countries thought the US might be able to take control of South Vietnam by military means. Now the US had failed militarily and had had to withdraw its troops. The Vietnam war had clearly weakened the United States. Meanwhile, other countries which had set their eyes on Southeast Asia did not possess the necessary strength, nor were they prepared to act. They were very apprehensive that the three Indochinese countries would win complete victory and strengthen their position. The vital issue was for us to win victory at an early date before they could step in. Even though they did not openly speak about their strategy all had secret strategies regarding the Southeast Asian region. So it was vital for us to liberate the South before the situation could be reversed. A unified Vietnam with a population of 50

million would not be an easy target for any prospective invader or interventionist.

We had to win and win comprehensively before the Saigon administration could react or reorganize and before any other country could intervene. To this end, we had to be well prepared for the general counteroffensive and general insurrection within one or two months if the strategic opportunity presented itself.

To launch major battles and win quickly we had to use whole army corps to put out of action whole divisions of the enemy. In the view of many foreign strategists, this was beyond our capacity. So it was all the more important to implement our strategy for major battles in order to take by surprise not only the Saigon administration and the United States but also the other countries which were scheming against Indochina and the whole of Southeast Asia.

Le Duan took a respite for refreshments. We availed ourselves of this moment to report to him more clearly on our reserve forces, the strategic supply routes on the east and the west of the Truong Son range and the increased movement of strategic units from North to South and within the South.

Le Duan added, " I am glad to hear that. We therefore already have a basis for devising a method of launching a decisive campaign to defeat the enemy... We must organize the strategic reserve forces into a strong army corps with a high degree of mobility, capable of destroying whole enemy divisions and dealing stunning blows to wipe out enemy forces in big chunks. On the organization and use of forces, we need to develop our combined strength. This is a tough question which can be solved only on a solid basis, both practical and theoretical.

"In particular, with regard to the regular army in military zones, they must be organized into full-fledged, well-equipped and highly mobile battalions so that they can quickly move deep behind enemy lines. At the same time we must have divisions or brigades equipped with light artillery and mortars to operate on the plains".

If in the coming year (1975), the movement in the urban areas became stronger and we could expand our control in the countryside, the United States would have to replace Nguyen Van Thieu in order to salvage the situation – something it still could do on the basis of clauses in the Paris Agreement.

"You should seriously discuss this scenario so that we might effect a real change of the balance of forces in 1975."

After the break, Le Trong Tan further elucidated the main intentions of the General Staff with regard to each battlezone.

In the Mekong River delta we should strive to destroy more than 1,000 enemy posts in 1974 and several thousand more in 1975. We should bring the population in the liberated zones up to three million and that in contested areas to two million. To this end, it is necessary to put out of action battalion-sized sections of the enemy and to be capable of also putting out of action enemy reinforcements of two or three battalions or more. By so doing we could open a corridor from the border to the 8th and 9th Military Zones. The General Staff was planning to send more reinforcements to Ben Tre and Tra Vinh, each of one regiment, so that by the end of 1974 the whole Mekong River delta might have 10,000 more troops. At the same time, more weapons would be sent to back up attacks on enemy posts, armoured vehicles, river boats and aircraft. The local armed forces

must fight and train at the same time and be able to join in rescue operations and co-ordinated battles whenever necessary. There is a need to improve the command of integrated campaign forces and organize more special task force groups in order to hit harder at enemy bases and storage dumps deep in enemy-held territory.

In the 5th Military Zone, the liberated areas in the west of Quang Nam province had to be extended. The General Staff had received word that we had captured the enemy's Nong Son camp wiping out four battalions including one battalion of commandos. We had to capture the remaining enemy bases in mountain areas. In 1975 we would have to expand the liberated zones on the plains from Quang Da to Binh Dinh and liberate one million more of the population.

In the highlands we had to capture isolated enemy bases both in the north and the remaining posts in the west so as to ensure total security for the strategic supply route and link up the south of the Central Highlands with the eastern part of Nam Bo.

In eastern Nam Bo, we needed to extend our rear guard along Highway 14 linking Bien Hoa to the 6th Zone, and defend and extend the contested areas around Saigon in order to tighten our encirclement of this vital city, at the same time cutting off enemy traffic on Highway 1 from Saigon to Phan Thiet and Highway 20 from Saigon to Da Lat.

Regarding strategic reserves, the General Staff was studying the possibility of mobilizing a whole army corps in a single battle and step by step organizing more on-the-spot army corps.

On battle tactics, apart from summing up experiences in the fight against pacification and attacks against enemy

military sectors at district level, the General Staff had assigned the Military Science Institute in collaboration with the Military High School the task of studying the art of organizing a military campaign and conducting co-ordinated action on a large scale in existing conditions. In fact, military training of the regular army had also been oriented towards large-scale fighting.

I added:

"Between now and the end of 1974 we could dismantle six or seven district military sectors and five or six enemy army groups, seize control of areas with between three and three and half million inhabitants and bring the population in contested areas to five million thus creating major changes which would lead to a qualitative change in 1975.

"Our foremost concern now is the struggle in the towns where the political movement is not strong enough. But if we could increase momentum in the military field we could exert a greater impact on the urban population. Then, in 1976 we could move much faster to deal the final blow in just a few months".

Le Duan commented:

"We must make preparations so that in 1975 we can launch both medium and large-scale attacks to put out of action whole divisions of the enemy. We should adopt such fighting tactics so as to both whittle down and cause disintegration of the enemy's forces. We should detect the enemy's weakest points at which to direct the blows. But this will not be simple. The point is how to take them by surprise. To this end, we should broaden the scale of our operations and penetrate more deeply behind enemy lines. As for reinforcements, more could be sent from the North to build economic projects, roads and also to serve as strategic reserves".

Le Duan spent the rest of the afternoon speaking about political education among the masses. He said that since 1954, the enemy in Saigon had never been as weak as it was now, both politically and economically. When Ngo Dinh Diem was in power, the enemy had been stronger than us because we had withdrawn our forces under the Geneva Agreements. When we had grown and toppled Diem the Americans had stepped in, so the enemy had remained strong. Now that the Americans had pulled out their Saigon agents could only weaken further. If we could capitalize on this situation we could take the movement in the towns to a higher level. Now in Saigon there were not only our forces but also the Third Force including many progressive intellectuals. In the meantime, the United States had its hands full back home. Nixon might have to step down and Ford would take the reins and might seek some sort of arrangement with us. We had to take the movement in the towns to a higher level in order to increase our pressure. We had to combine both forms of struggle in the towns – legal and illegal. Secrecy was the basic condition for the Party's existence, legality was the condition for the development of the political struggle.

What most impressed me after one day's discussions was Le Duan's idea about strategic opportunity. Obviously the situation demanded that we accelerate our preparations. The coming few years would be the best opportunity yet for us to win a decisive victory. The longer the fight dragged on the more difficult the situation would become. We had to fight and win before the enemy could heighten their guard and before other nations possibly interfered.

The following day Le Duan dwelt on the task of economic build-up in the North, on the law of socialist economic development from small production to large-scale

production, on the relationship between industry and agriculture at district level and on a national scale, on the relationship between national defence and economics, and on the participation of the army in economic construction.

But he soon returned to the question of the revolution in the South. In fact, the question was too big, too important for any Party cadre to pass up even for a moment.

We reported to Le Duan on a major sticking point which needed immediate solution: how to get enough artillery shells for the South. Only with enough artillery shells could we launch major co-ordinated attacks into the towns and major military bases of the Saigon puppets and put out of action large chunks of the enemy's forces. One hundred thousand shells were all that we had at the moment. Instructions had been given to retrieve the shell casings so that the munition workshops could recycle them. We suggested that the Central Committee ask for emergency aid from the socialist countries.

Le Duan said, "Obviously China is exerting pressure on us. We must ask for aid from all socialist countries including China. Meanwhile, the munitions department should continue to study the possibility of recycling the used shells".

At the end of that morning of July 22, following the joint meeting we split into smaller groups to exchange views on the chance of winning final victory. We unanimously forecast a high point in 1975 and possibly a further major development in 1976 before the presidential election in the United States. By dealing a "decisive blow" in 1976 we might force the enemy to accept a tripartite government in South Vietnam. This would smooth the way towards reunification of the country in two or three years. In any case we must be prepared to seize

upon any sudden changes in the situation. Le Duan said, "It would be marvellous if we could win in a few years"

On the afternoon before bidding us farewell, Le Duan added: "Remember that we must at any rate draw up a strategic plan to create the strategic opportunity and to seize upon that strategy".

As our car drove out of Haiphong, I was again drawn to the number one issue – identifying the necessary factors for building and perfecting the strategic plan. There were still many imponderables to which I had to find the answers.

First, was there a possibility of the reintroduction of American troops when we struck hard and the Saigon army was in danger of collapse? We had many times raised and discussed this possibility and reached the consensus viewpoint that the possibility of a reintroduction of American ground troops was very slim, but what about a resumption of bombing, at least along the coast? Of course, such an intervention could not have a decisive impact on the outcome of the war, but it would present us with no small difficulty and further complications.

Secondly, how should we co-ordinate a popular uprising with the actions of the regular army? We used to speak of enhancing the impact of the "three strategic blows" – the regular army, countryside and the urban areas – in order to create an integrated force. Now we already had a strong regular army which was likely to grow stronger, but we could not say the same for the political struggle in the towns. Meanwhile, in the countryside the enemy was militarizing to a high level their repressive apparatus in villages and hamlets. There was no doubt that we had to further strengthen our military and political forces as a precondition for the masses to rise up. We had to win more and more people over

to our side in order to extend our control in the countryside and on this basis to further increase mass support for the revolution. Our weakest point obviously lay in the towns where the popular masses and the Third Force had not definitively taken sides with the revolution.

Were we sure that the workers, public employees, market vendors and students would be well prepared when the revolutionary masses in the countryside stormed into the cities along with our regular army to overthrow Nguyen Van Thieu? Theoretically, what should be the form of the final assault – general attack and general insurrection or general offensive and general uprising?.

Thirdly, how about our infrastructure in general and artillery shells in particular? We needed a lot more of them to launch major battles. Recycling used shells was only a stop-gap measure which could not ensure accuracy or the quantity required when major action came. Of course, we had to make the most economical use of them and also to capture enemy ammunition. But an adequate and stable supply was still needed.

And when would the big opportunity come?

Le Duan said it would be when the main force was ready, when the political forces had become strong enough to gain complete control over the countryside and the urban movement was strong enough to launch an insurrection. Earlier, we had envisaged that the big opportunity might come in 1976 and even in 1977 but now Le Duan said it should be earlier, the sooner the better because, he stressed, the longer it was delayed the more complicated the situation would become.

We started re-examining the old draft plan and made the necessary modifications and amendments in the light of Le Duan's analysis.

It was during those few days that we received, almost simultaneously, two important pieces of news, that our army had captured Nong Son and Thuong Duc, and about the resignation of Richard Nixon and his replacement by Gerald Ford. These reports were crucial in helping us to shape our final draft plan.

In fact, during this autumn of 1974, particularly in July and August, the Southern Military Command's plan was to launch military campaigns in five strategic areas. Nong Son - Trung Phuoc and Que Son in western Quang Nam, Thuong Duc in western Quang Da, Minh Long - Gia Vut in western Quang Ngai, and Deo Nhong - Phu My in northern Binh Dinh, with special emphasis on the enemy's military sector at Nong Son and Thuong Duc.

The Thuong Duc sector had a particularly vital role as the gateway to the enemy's military complex at Danang. Together with Nong Son, Tien Phuoc and other areas, our army had captured Thuong Duc and repulsed all counter-attacks by the enemy's mobile parachute division, the backbone of the Saigon army. This allowed us to reach the conclusion that the balance of forces on the battlefield had changed substantially, enabling our army to attack the enemy even within their strongest fortifications including defence installations at district level, and to defeat enemy attempts to recapture them. The Thuong Duc battle proved beyond doubt that the Saigon army had weakened considerably; their air power had sunk to an all-time low and so had the mobility of their ground forces. A Saigon army major captured during this battle conceded that they did not have enough aircraft to ferry troops and were encountering major difficulties in moving their troops overland. In a word, the battles at Nong

Son and Thuong Duc convinced us that our mobile forces had definitely become stronger than the enemy's. This had no small impact on our strategic thinking.

Meanwhile, as had been predicted, infighting within the ruling circles in the United States had intensified. The anti-Nixon movement triggered by Watergate, which had abated for a while, now saw a resurgence with the return of American troops. The US Congress turned down a request for additional aid to Nguyen Van Thieu, Thieu appealed to his army to fight "in the manner of the poor", there was the obvious lack of air power and other means of mobility, then Nixon's humiliating stepdown – all this pointed to a rapidly receding possibility of direct American intervention. However, we needed to continue to observe Ford's behaviour. His most recent statement showed that this new US President had not given up the Nixon doctrine even without Nixon, and that he had not decided to drop Nguyen Van Thieu.

In the process of reviewing the draft strategic plan under the guidance of Le Trong Tan, then of Cao Van Khanh, we reached unanimity in our assessment of the balance of forces and of the world situation. We focused our discussions on how to plan concrete steps for the implementation of our strategic decisions.

We had to plan specific actions to cope with unexpected developments and also to adopt appropriate guidelines and methods of action. We then buckled down to the drawing up of a specific programme for 1975 and the outline of the plan for 1976.

The overall guideline for 1975 was to make the most of the element of surprise in launching large-scale offensives with the following aims:

1. To basically defeat the enemy's pacification strategy to win over more of the population in the countryside.

2. To whittle down enemy forces to a level below strategic significance.

3. To destroy or neutralize an important part of the enemy's material reserves and to cut the enemy's strategic supply lines.

4. To consolidate the liberated zones and resistance bases.

5. To build up our forces in all spheres of activity.

6. To widen the strategic corridor and operational routes, and to establish more jumping-off points close to the cities and other important enemy bases.

7. To step up the movement in the towns, especially Saigon.

8. To basically complete preparations so as to take the initiative in launching a general offensive and uprising if the opportunity presented itself.

We then assigned specific targets for each area. We planned to launch three major offensive drives in 1975 with specific targets and with definite programmes of co-ordinated action.

There would also be three drives to build up and develop our forces in the towns (particularly Saigon, Danang and Hue). That would also be the time for us to step up political agitation among enemy troops, prepare our mobile strategic forces, complete our strategic supply plan and further consolidate our strategic routes to eastern Nam Bo and the network of operational routes.

On general directions for the 1976 programme of action we foresaw three eventualities and worked out detailed programmes to meet each of these contingencies. But these programmes were based on military gains in 1975. These three eventualities were:

1. The enemy stubbornly kept prosecuting the war;

2. The enemy had to back down one step and implement the Agreement;

3. The opportunity for a general insurrection in the towns arose earlier than expected, i.e. in 1976.

By August 26, 1974 we had finalized the draft strategic plan. This was the seventh draft since it was first drawn up in March 1974 after the Central Committee had issued its resolution. The draft was sent to each member of the Politburo and the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee. In August, the Chief of Staff, Van Tien Dung, returned from a vacation abroad. He made important additional observations on the plan. The Central Organising Group made further modifications in the light of these suggestions before the plan was submitted to the leaders.

About the same time, that is, in late September, the General Staff received many intelligence reports on the enemy situation, most noteworthy of which was a report by the Saigon General Staff to Nguyen Van Thieu about the prospects for 1975.

In this report the Saigon General Staff said that if the United States could supply 1.4 billion dollars in aid, the Saigon army would gain control of the whole of South Vietnam. If the aid came to only 1.1 billion then Saigon would lose the northern half of the 1st Military Zone, and if it received only 900 million then Saigon would lose control over the whole of the 1st Military Zone and some provinces in the 2nd Zone. If the aid was cut to 750 million they would lose both the 1st and 2nd Military Zones and if it came to only 600 million Saigon army control would be reduced to half the 3rd Military Zone from Bien Hoa to the 4th Zone. The report also made it known that by September 1974 about

1,000 aircraft had been grounded due to shortages of fuel and spare parts.

Also according to this report, the Saigon army then comprised about one million men, of whom more than 150,000 were non-combatants and about 200,000 others existed only on paper. Recruitment was becoming more and more difficult.

Accordingly, the General Staff planed to withdraw from 25-30 per cent of isolated posts which were unlikely to withstand our onslaught.

On the political front, it was reported that the United States was planning to hold a meeting with countries concerned to find a political solution to the South Vietnam issue and to bring the US-controlled Third Force on to the political stage in Saigon and also to press Thieu to implement some important remaining clauses in the Paris Agreement.

While checking these reports we presented this captured document to the conference of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee as reference documents for discussions. The day before the conference opening, the Combat Operations Department had drawn several military maps and hung them in the conference hall. It drew particular attention to a map of the battle of Nong Son and the Thuong Duc district military sector, and subsequent counter-attacks by the enemy's parachute brigade.

The conference lasted from September 30 to October 8 and was held in two rounds, the first two days devoted to hearings followed by discussions up to October 5 and the adoption of the conference resolution. Vo Chi Cong had come from the northern areas to attend the conference.

I reported on the military situation over the past nine months while Le Trọng Tan reported on the two-year draft strategic plan and the operational plan for 1975.

On the situation of both the enemy and our side and on developments in the military situation, the report of the General Staff made it clear that although enemy strength had been scaled down it remained significant. In particular, the enemy still had a powerful air force and artillery and still maintained tight control of the population in areas under their occupation.

On the other hand, the report noted that after nine months of bitter fighting, it had become clear that the "Ly Thuong Kiet 74" plan of the Saigon puppets was facing complete bankruptcy. The situation on the battlefield had evolved very quickly since April 1974. The enemy was no longer able to withstand our attacks and counter-offensives. Based on actual statistics, the report highlighted the fact that the enemy had lost an important part of their forces and the number of posts or bases captured by us or abandoned under pressure was increasing daily. Their mobile forces were thinly spread due to continuous harassment, making it impossible for the enemy to send reinforcements when attacked by our regular army or guerrillas. Our liberated zone was expanding quickly in all battlezones, from Tri-Thien and the 5th Military Zone to eastern Nam Bo and the Mekong River delta.

Our network of strategic roads had also been lengthened and consolidated, cutting deeply into enemy-held areas.

The economic difficulties of the Saigon regime were also having a clear impact on its military strategy and the morale of the Saigon army. On the other hand, as a result of our correct policy towards the families of those serving in the puppet army and administration and also of brutal and repressive acts by the Thieu regime against the opposition, resentment against United States policy and the Nguyen Van Thieu regime was intensifying in the towns, although the CIA

was making a major effort to plant agents in the urban movement in an attempt to split it off from the South Vietnam National Liberation front.

In assessing the Saigon regime's declining capabilities, the report of the General Staff noted that this was not because they were conserving their strength as some had presumed but actually because they were losing strength. In fact, they wanted very much to cut our strategic supply routes and recapture territory lost to us in recent months, but this was beyond their capability. In such a situation, if the United States further cut down on aid, the puppets would lose strength even more quickly. It was also becoming self-evident that the one billion or more US dollars the United States was intending to give Saigon fell far short of requirements for sustaining an army of more than one million men. But even if the United States added a few hundred million dollars, that would do little to fundamentally help change the situation.

On US intervention, the Politburo had pointed out that the possibility of the US recommitting ground troops was very remote, but we could not rule out the possibility of intervention by its air force and navy.

But even if such an eventuality did occur it would not do much to help save the Nguyen Van Thieu regime from collapse. This assessment still stood.

On our part, although considerable progress had been made by our army, there still needed to be better co-operation among the different armed services, especially in attacks on dug-in enemy units. Even in the Thuong Duc battle we could have done better in terms of annihilation of the enemy's live forces.

In its report, the General Staff went to considerable lengths to detail each item of supplies from the North in

order to provide a basis for working out operational as well as strategic plans for the coming months, especially in 1975.

On the next steps to be taken, the report laid down two possibilities – that of either overthrowing Thieu and forming a coalition government as a step towards complete victory, or using a decisive military blow at the enemy's nerve centre and winning total victory within the shortest possible time.

The conference carefully weighed these two possibilities and each specific step in view of their momentous impact on the whole strategy of the revolution.

On strategic measures, the General Staff proposed the following:

1. Continuing to disrupt the enemy's pacification strategy and extend the area under our control through concerted campaigns.

2. Launching large-scale military campaigns to wipe out whole regiments and divisions of the enemy and extend the liberated zones.

3. Splitting the enemy strategically and tactically through military operations, sabotage, encirclement and agitation among enemy ranks.

4. Boosting the movement in urban areas to a higher level to facilitate the activities of the Third Force. To enter into an alliance with this force in case Thieu was overthrown.

5. Adopting a flexible diplomatic policy in order to limit the possibility of a renewed American intervention.

Finally, I reported on our side's specific efforts in strategic preparations over the past nine months in the following areas – building up the liberated zones and resistance

bases, extension of strategic and operational routes, the increase in transportation capacity for supplying the front, and building up the armed forces in both North and South, especially mobile strategic forces in the direction of large-scale co-ordinated battles.

I also reported on the army recruitment situation and troop strength on each battlefield as well as the number of non-combatants (sick and wounded soldiers, men newly released by the enemy, numbers involved in economic construction projects and road building on the Truong Son route), the number of troops under training as reinforcements and so on. I reported that the North had by then a population of 23.8 million, including 984,000 young men in the 17-25 age group. I proposed that the Politburo agree to recruit 150,000 more young men by the end of 1974 and 60,000 more by early 1975.

Le Trong Tan then detailed the two-year draft strategic plan and the plan for 1975 drawn up by the General Staff. He also mentioned the initial comments and suggestions of members of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee.

On the strategic objective the General Staff proposed that we achieve the liberation of South Vietnam no later than 1976, making allowances for a delay until early 1977 at the latest.

To achieve this objective, the strategic plan would comprise two basic steps.

Stage 1 (1975): To catch the enemy off guard by launching large-scale offensives in many areas with a view to :

1. Defeating in essence the enemy's pacification strategy, wiping out and causing the disintegration of an important part of the Saigon army (whittling down enemy troop strength to a level below strategic significance), and liberat-

ing or seizing control of most parts of the Mekong River delta, the outskirts of Saigon, and the plains in the 5th Military Zone and Tri-Thien areas.

2. Opening up a strategic corridor from the southern part of the Central Highlands to eastern Nam Bo and up to the three southern provinces of the 5th Military Zone, from Tay Ninh to northern Saigon, from Kien Phuong and Kien Tuong to My Tho, and extending the resistance bases and jumping-off points to close to the towns, villages and other vital enemy sectors.

3. Destroying an important part of the military apparatus and economic potential of the enemy, and disrupting enemy traffic.

4. Building up the movement in the towns.

5. Building up our forces, consolidating the liberated zones, preparing the battleground and creating the conditions for Stage 2.

Stage 2 (1976) would be to launch the general offensive and general insurrection to liberate South Vietnam completely.

The strategic plan for 1975 was divided into three steps:

Step 1: Medium-scale military operations from December 1974 to February 1975, mainly in the Mekong River delta and eastern Nam Bo (it would then be the rainy season in other battlefields).

Step 2: This would be the main step lasting from March to June 1975, with the launching of large-scale offensives in the southern part of the Central Highlands and other related battlefronts in eastern Nam Bo, north of the 5th Military Zone and Tri-Thien areas. In the Mekong River delta we would continue attacks and uprisings to extend the liberated zones and foil the enemy's pacification strategy.

Step 3: From August to October 1975. This would be a follow-up to the two previous steps, when we would intensify our military operations in Tri-Thien and the 5th Military Zone while taking time to consolidate our forces, standing ready to implement the "opportunity strategy".

On strategic directions and tasks for each battlefield the General Staff proposed the following.

Tri-Thien and Quang-Da would serve as support battlefronts to divert the enemy's regular forces and cut enemy traffic on Highway 1. At the same time, we should also intensify our counter-attacks against the enemy's pacification efforts and expand the liberated areas in Tri-Thien and the vicinity of the city of Dan ang.

The plains of the 5th Military Zone would be the main theatre of battle against the enemy's pacification programme (chiefly Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces) for whittling down enemy numbers, liberating most parts of the countryside and splitting the enemy strategically.

The Central Highlands (particularly the southern part) would be the main theatre for operations by our regular army to destroy the enemy's live forces. In Nam Bo, the Mekong River delta and the fringes of Saigon would be the main theatre for the fight against the pacification strategy, aimed at tightening the noose around and isolating Saigon. In eastern Nam Bo we should draw out enemy forces to whittle them down, expand the liberated and contested areas in order to establish a corridor from Tay Ninh, and in co-operation with the 8th Military Zone open the Kien Phong - Kien Tuong corridor and establish a jumping-off point to bring our troops close to Saigon and My Tho, thus lending support to the urban movement.

In the draft plan the General Staff also proposed specific targets for 1975 and the tasks and operational strategy for each battlefield for each period of time.

Regarding strategic opportunity, the General Staff anticipated three possibilities. This would present itself when we struck hard especially in Step 2 of 1975, right in the rainy season in Nam Bo and in the late months of 1975 when the Saigon administration organized the presidential election.

The guideline to be provided for each operational drive would also be a process of following the reactions of the Saigon regime and the United States in order to detect in time signs of the emergence of the great opportunity to liberate South Vietnam.

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After hearing the report from the General Staff the conference of the Politburo did an in-depth analysis of all eventualities.

The conference noted that the United States had failed in its war of aggression against Vietnam and had had to pull out its troops. This had been a major military defeat and also a fundamental failure of the Nixon doctrine.

The US administration was facing mounting difficulties in all spheres – political, military and economic – both within the country and externally. It had not anticipated that the Watergate scandal might lead to Nixon stepping down. Jerry Ford had been installed in the White House without an election. US economic problems were also enormous. Inflation had reached 12 per cent. The living conditions of working people remained precarious, prompting them to resist renewed involvement in Vietnam. Regarding the international balance of power, the United States had fallen behind the Soviet Union in many kinds of strategic weapons. Conflicts between the United States and its allies had intensified. The anti-American movement was continuing to grow in many parts of the world. The spectre of a new crisis was looming large in the United States.

For his part, Truong Chinh said that as far as South Vietnam was concerned the United States had before it two options, either replacing Thieu with another puppet and trying to limit our gains by relying on the clauses of the Paris Agreement or continuing its intervention in one form or another in order to save the situation. We needed to capitalize on the difficulties of the United States to win a decisive victory with the least risk.

Pham Van Dong then cited an instance of the US acknowledging its failure in Indochina. He recalled that during his meeting with Kissinger in 1973 he had said,

"The Yuan empire in China three times sent their armies to invade Vietnam, but they were defeated on all three occasions. However, on all these occasions, after defeating the enemy we supplied them with food and pack horses with which to repatriate their troops. Now it is your turn. How many times will you invade our country?"

Kissinger raised one finger. Pham Van Dong went on, "No, I cannot trust you."

After recalling this anecdote, Pham Van Dong said,

"Things have now become even harder for the United States. I bet they won't intervene once again, either by land or air. Because how could a land war be determined by the air force, which could at most act as a fire brigade?"

The conference agreed that the United States, despite having failed in its aggressive war against Vietnam, had not given up its plans for the Southeast Asian region and still had major potential. We still had to guard against a madman (in the words of Nguyen Duy Trinh). Although we could rule out the possibility of renewed intervention by American ground troops, we should not rule out the possibility of the US using its air force and navy to save the Thieu regime. The con-

ference came to the conclusion that whatever the scale of any American intervention the US would not be able to reverse the situation and save its puppet regime in South Vietnam from complete collapse.

On the Nguyen Van Thieu clique, the conference noted that although it still had a big and well-equipped army and still kept control over major segments of the population, it had severe handicaps, it was politically isolated, the morale of its army had sunk to an unprecedented low and it was dependent on the United States politically, economically and militarily. Should US aid fall further, the morale of its army would plunge even further.

Never before had the balance of forces been so favourable to us. Our military operations in 1973 and 1974 had been quite successful and our casualties comparatively light. We had also achieved substantial successes in our strategic preparations at the rear, at the front and on strategic supply routes. In short, we had created the necessary conditions to win a decisive victory in a few years' time.

After undertaking an in-depth analysis of the situation, the conference unanimously adopted the two-year draft strategic plan and the operational plan for 1975 together with targets for army recruitment proposed by the General Staff.

We understood that this was an initial strategic decision by the Politburo to serve as a guideline for the General Staff and the sectors concerned, especially the various departments of the Ministry of Defence, in making the necessary preparations. The Politburo also decided to convene an expanded session in December with the participation of the leaders of the various battlefronts in order to arrive at a final resolution.

Both 1975 and 1976 would be crucial years in the war of liberation. But 1975 would be the year in which to create the

right conditions for the final battle in 1976. In fact, 1975 began with a series of attacks by us in the southern part of the Central Highlands, along with a drive towards the plains to link up with eastern Nam Bo. This success needed to be consolidated and built on as a basis for action in 1976. In any case, we had to use the element of surprise in strategic terms if we wanted to make progress.

At the same time, we should continue to overcome weak points such as the still weak urban movement, loose co-ordination among different battlefronts and among the "three prongs of attack", and so on.

In any case, the conference stressed, we must not let the strategic opportunity slip from our grasp.

On strategic targets, the regular army must be prepared to strike in either the Central Highlands, especially the southern part which was a very important battlefront, or eastern Nam Bo where the final and decisive battle would be waged. We had to observe utmost secrecy and retain the element of surprise in moving our forces to the Mekong River delta as well as in preparations for a major offensive in the southern part of the Central Highlands.

To launch major battles and put out of action major sections of the enemy's forces, the regular army must be well prepared organisationally, have the necessary troop strength and the necessary number of trained officers, and a high level of organisation and command in co-ordinated fighting. In the use of forces we must know now to combine mobile with static forces and have good reserves.

On tactics in both strategic and campaign operations we must combine the "three powerful blows" (the regular army, the countryside and the towns), combine the three prongs of attack and attack the enemy in each of the three strategic

areas ⁽²²⁾, launch major battles using the regular army to put out of action large number of enemy forces in mountain areas, and also co-ordinated battles between the different armed services, to wipe out entire military sectors and extend the liberated zones in the Mekong River delta and the 5th Military Zone. We must continue to split the enemy's forces, disrupt their traffic, tighten our encirclement and step up agitation among enemy ranks, provoking mutinies and desertion.

We must attach importance to political and ideological education in order to make the entire Party, army and people understand the strategic direction and the need to seize upon the strategic opportunity and direct all actions and thoughts towards winning in the final test of strength.

On the morning of 8 October, Le Duan summed up the work of the first phase of the Politburo meeting. He instructed the General Staff to write a summary report and send it by radio to a number of field commanders before the conference resumed.

Starting his concluding speech, Le Duan said, "The Politburo has resolved to achieve a national democratic people's revolution in South Vietnam. This is an event of paramount importance, a very courageous decision. This decision is the outcome of the collective wisdom of the Politburo, and the result of a long weighing up process based on the experience of several decades of fighting, on the implementation of revolution on the battlefield, on the balance of forces in our country and throughout the world..."

After analysing the reasons why the United States had entered South Vietnam in 1954 only to withdraw in 1973, Le Duan said, "The United States jumped into South Vietnam on the assumption that it was very strong and we were very weak and accordingly, it would defeat us without much

difficulty. The opposite has now occurred. We have won and taken a big step forward, it has failed and has retreated a long way".

On our strategic aims when signing the Paris Agreement, Le Duan said, "Although the United States had to accept defeat and pull out of South Vietnam, it still has significant forces and still nurtures evil strategies against our country. Let us never believe that the enemy have reached the end of their tether. For our part, although we have won repeatedly we should not indulge in subjectivism. Many difficulties lie ahead. What is more, assistance from the socialist camp is no longer coming in as we might wish. It is in that context that we signed the Paris Agreement. For us, the important thing is not that the Agreement recognizes two administrations, two armies, two zones of control and the eventual setting up of a tripartite government. The essential element is the task of booting the Americans out while our army remains in place, the North-South corridor remains open, the rear still links up with the front, and we remain on the offensive. Our strategic intent is to preserve intact our position and forces in the South in order to continue attacking the enemy". He then spoke of the method of struggle which consisted mainly of relying on the Paris Agreement to rally the masses and drive a wedge among the enemy and isolate them. However the situation might evolve, we would remain firm in our determination to go forward and win final victory.

On the strategic opportunity to completely liberate South Vietnam, Le Duan said, "This opportunity has now emerged. It has come only after 20 years of fighting. We must seize it in order to take the cause of national liberation to complete victory".

He then analysed US designs against Vietnam and Southeast Asia following the liberation of North Vietnam in

1954. The US intent then was to rule unchallenged in Southeast Asia. But now that it had failed, the United States wanted a compromise in order to preserve its interests and influence along with other big powers which also nurtured hegemonistic aims in the region. The latter as well as the United States considered a unified and independent Vietnam closely united with Laos and Cambodia as a major obstacle to their hegemonistic designs. Accordingly, they were trying to check the advance of the Vietnamese revolution and prolong the partition of Vietnam.

Taking into account all these considerations we affirmed that this was the best opportunity for our people to completely liberate the South, win complete victory for the national and democratic revolution and to help promote the revolutions in Laos and Cambodia so that they might, too, achieve their own national liberation. We should not let the opportunity pass because such an opportunity would not recur. Things would become extremely complicated if we waited 10 or 15 years more, when the Saigon puppets and the aggressors would have recovered and the expansionist forces become more powerful.

The essential question which needed a clear answer when we made our strategic resolution was: would the United States re-intervene in South Vietnam? We believed there was no such possibility. We affirmed that even if the United States should intervene again to some extent, it could not reverse the situation and could not prevent our final victory.

The question for us was winning the most economical way possible in terms of lives and material resources.

We had to win but to win quickly, neatly and totally. To this end, we had to secure the element of surprise and launch the final offensive before the enemy could recover their

guard. Can we do that, he asked? We can and must do it, Le Duan added.

After analysing the balance of forces since the signing of the Paris Agreement, Le Duan said: "What should be stressed here is the major potential we have and need to bring into play so as to create integrated strength for winning in the final test of strength.

"Our strength lies first of all in the unity of the entire people, from North to South, from the rear to the battlefield.

"Our strength also lies in the justice of our cause, national independence and socialism, which are inextricably linked with the three revolutionary currents of the time.

"Finally, our strength lies in the strength of people's war."

Le Duan then concluded:

"We are resolved to mobilize the greatest possible forces from the entire Party, army and people in both zones to launch the final offensive and uprising to bring the revolutionary war to its culmination in order to destroy or cause the disintegration of the whole of the Saigon army, to capture Saigon, the last hide-out of the enemy, together with all other towns in South Vietnam, overthrow the puppet administration at the centre and at all levels, and restore power to the people, liberate the South completely and accomplish the national democratic and people's revolution throughout the country and eventually to reunify the motherland. Right now, we have to make urgent preparations in all areas in order to create the best material conditions for winning greater and greater victories and advancing to the final battle within 1975 or in 1976 at the latest".

The conference was followed by active and urgent preparations. A host of problems were put before the

General Staff – amending the operational plan for 1975, drafting the programme for army recruitment, for combat drill, for the supply of manpower and resources to the battlefronts in the South, making projections of the enemy situation in case Thieu was overthrown, and so on – in a word, everything necessary for seizing the strategic opportunity as soon as it appeared.

The underlying objective of all these preparations was to spell out the strategic intention of the Politburo, i.e. stepping up preparations for a long-term revolutionary struggle while not losing sight of any contingency plan if the situation suddenly took a new turn.

On October 28 the second plan was adopted by the Central Military Committee. This was the eighth draft submitted to the meeting of the Politburo.

The expanded conference of the Politburo was not opened until December. In the meantime, on the instructions of the Central Military Committee, the General Staff informed the various battlefronts of the second plan so that they might direct the units under their command in that direction.

For our part, we had to speed up preparations in a wide range of areas in order to implement the strategic operational plan for 1975.

An atmosphere of urgency prevailed in all the offices of the General Staff from October onwards after the first meeting of the Politburo.

The General Staff sent its representatives to different localities – one to Nghe An to assign new tasks to Division 316, another to the 1st Army Corps to detail its tasks before it went to the South following training in Sam Son, Thanh Hoa province, others to various armed services to inspect

preparations by technical units which were poised to go South at any time.

On the battlefronts, our men were busy with a thousand and one tasks; the 4th Army Corps had to replenish its strength and reorganize and form new technical units for B2; the Tri-Thien Military Zone and 2nd Army Corps also had to replenish and their forces.

Then we also had to open up more roads for mechanised units southwest of Hue and move in more artillery to get ready to bombard major enemy airports and seaports. We also had to supply more manpower and technical equipment for the regular army and local armies in the 5th Military Zone, supply more munitions for Division 968 which had returned from southern Laos, and so on. All that had to be done with great urgency and with close co-ordination between the General Staff and the different general departments of the army.

The underlying idea was to ensure all the necessary reinforcements for the South to win the decisive battle in any circumstances. The two army recruitment drives in 1974 had been very successful, meeting the great manpower demands of the battlefronts before the dry season set in. Many families sent every able-bodied son and daughter into the army.

Together with the General Logistics Department we made a final check on preparations. The Truong Son army was putting the final touches to the strategic supply route before the dry season set in in order to ensure an uninterrupted traffic flow to Loc Ninh all year round. Each battlefront was also urgently building campaign routes to targeted destinations. In the strategic corridor, logistics units were urgently installing storage depots and stations from Highway 9 to La Bang Khe.

The oil pipeline had reached the fuel stores extending from southern Laos up to Bu Gia Map.

Army 559 was also urgently dispatching hundreds of thousand of tonnes of strategic supplies under the two-year programme for 1975 and 1976 and part of the following year.

Over the last months of 1974 one of our greatest concerns was ensuring the quality of the second military training programme especially for officers. Objectively, the training programme in this second drive had been more thorough than the first and was carried out in more difficult conditions. The time allowed was shorter and there was also a great turnover of cadres as a result of changes in personnel services. The Military Training Department, under the direct leadership of Vuong Thua Vu, deputy General Chief of Staff, closely collaborated with different military zones, army corps and army services in ensuring that all the newly-reinforced battalions completed their training programmes, especially with regard to military tactics and command skills in combined operations. Vuong Thua Vu was one of the most talented high-level officers to emerge during the war of resistance against the French. He was known as a general experienced in organizing large-scale combined operations among the different armed services.

In November 1974 the General Staff sent its envoys to different military zones, army corps and armed services, taking along instructions on complementary training in view of the tasks for 1975. They also disseminated information on experiences newly drawn from the fight on the plains in the South, notably during attacks on towns and villages, on district military sectors to destroy whole enemy battalions and battle groups, and also on co-ordinated battles between the

different armed services aimed at destroying whole enemy divisions.

With regard to Division 316 in particular, this could be done only when it had arrived in the Central Highlands.

The second round of meetings of the Politburo, the Central Military Committee and the commanders of various battlefronts began in mid-December when the first drive of the general offensive in 1975 had been underway in the Mekong River delta for 12 days.

Pham Hung, Tran Van Tra and Phan Van Dang from the South, and Vo Chi Cong and Chu Huy Man from the 5th Military Zone, had arrived in Hanoi in early December.

As at any such conference held previously, several days before the official meeting began, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee met separately with the military commanders from the various battlefields to hear them report on the precise situation.

Pham Hung and Tran Van Tra reported on the situation in B2 from mid-1973 to late 1974. They stressed in particular the visible improvement in the military situation over the recent rainy season. They detailed the programme for future action especially on Highway 14 to Dong Xoai.

Vo Chi Cong and Chu Huy Man reported on the military situation in the 5th Military Zone over the past two years, characterized by the rapid expansion of the liberated zones and the moving of our troops ever closer to enemy positions on the plains. In particular, we had built or restored 480 kilometres of road. Also worthy of note was the increasing volume of military supplies from the North and satisfactory results in food production in liberated areas.

The second round of the conference focused on questions which had been put at the first round – how to assess the

change in the balance of forces, targets for 1975, and what the main direction of our attacks should be, when the strategic opportunity might appear, how to seize upon it, and so on.

The Politburo and the Central Military Committee spent most time listening to reports from the field commanders. The conference discussed in detail various possibilities and relevant measures and finally reached consensus on all the matters raised.

Van Tien Dung dwelt on the use of appropriate forces and tactics. Le Duc Tho analysed the situation on the part of the United States on the opportunity and the balance of forces on which to draw up our two-year plan, on directions for thwarting the enemy's pacification programme, putting out of action enemy forces, and also the political awareness campaign among enemy troops. Pham Van Dong stressed the need to use our integrated strength and to strengthen our infrastructure and the training of new recruits. Truong Chinh highlighted the characteristics of the situation in the two zones. He particularly stressed the need to launch the general offensive from the Central Highlands, Buon Ma Thuot in particular. Tran Quoc Hoan, Le Van Luong and Nguyen Duy Trinh also spoke, drawing the attention of the conference to the need to intensify our diplomatic activities. While the conference was in progress the Combat Operations Department issued daily reports on the latest battlefield developments, and the reactions of Washington, Saigon and the Saigon army commanders. They particularly pointed to valuable lessons learned from the battle of Phuoc Long.

In fact, the Phuoc Long battle had been launched only after careful debate among the General Staff and the field commanders from B2. Two options were put forward – Dong

Xoai or Phuoc Long – but finally the latter was chosen as the target.

Until the end of 1974 our greatest concern would remain the supply of ammunition, especially artillery shells. In a message to the High Command, Tran Van Tra was already sounding the alarm. He wrote, "As of now (end of 1974) there remains in the ammunition depots of the main force units and general reserves only 4,800 120 mm mortar rounds, 1190 160 mm mortar rounds, 6,500 122 mm grenade shells, 300 105 mm artillery rounds and 7,800 130 mm artillery rounds...". He concluded, "Please urgently send as much ammunition as possible to B2 early in the dry season of 1975".

The situation was even more serious on the B1 battlefield. In early September, in a message to the High Command. Phat, deputy Chief of Staff of the 5th Zone, had reckoned that by the end of 1974 there would remain only 1,100 120mm mortar rounds, 80 160 mm mortar rounds, 1,000 85 mm cannon shells, 4,500 130 mm cannon shells and 469 122 mm cannon shells.

The same could be seen on other battlefields. At Thuong Duc in particular, after we had overrun the enemy's district headquarters, a message from the battlefield said that after one month of operations we were running out of steam, and lacking ammunition, especially for recoilless guns which could be used only for another low-intensity battle.

In that context, the commanders from B2 wanted to strike Dong Xoai first while we in the General Staff decided to take on Bu Dang and Bu Na which lay further north on Highway 14. The reason was simple: Bu Dang and Bu Na were more vulnerable to attack. We could then use the ammunition taken from the enemy there to fight the enemy at Dong Xoai. In fact, in the capture of these positions we

seized four 105 mm howitzers and 7,000 shells. Then we moved on to Dong Xoai. On December 27, 1974 Le Duc Anh, deputy commander of the southern battlefield, reported that on December 26 our army had captured Dong Xoai without having to use tanks even though we had positioned one company of tanks as a reserve force.

With the amount of ammunition captured from Bu Na, Bu Dang and Dong Xoai, the General Staff decided to take on Phuoc Long. In a private meeting with the members of the Central Military Committee, Le Duan ordered the use of one company of 130 mm artillery in this battle.

On January 6, 1975, after 26 days of continuous fighting, news of victories won by the army in eastern Nam Bo and on Highway 14 (Phuoc Long) reached the meeting room of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, auguring well for a very successful dry season.

What was the enemy reaction? Three days earlier, Nguyen Van Thieu had convened a special meeting of his cabinet to assess the situation. He promised a reward of 3.2 million South Vietnam piastres to his troops in Phuoc Long if they could hold out. But when more than 6,000 Saigon troops at Phuoc Long had been either put out of action or routed, the Thieu-controlled press in Saigon tried to play up the news that the American aircraft-carrier Enterprise and the cruiser Long Beach, together with many destroyers and oil tankers, had left Subic Bay in the Philippines bound for the South Vietnam coast and that the 3rd US Marine Division in Japan had been put on red alert. But the Thieu cabinet was like a deflated balloon when a White House spokesman announced that President Ford did not intend to violate the Congressional ban on the use of US military forces in Vietnam. Thieu's ravings about "recapturing Phuoc

Long" became a pathetic call for three days of "prayers for Phuoc Long".

The situation developed even more quickly in the Mekong River delta. The liberated zones had grown rapidly and we had been able to link up the supply routes to the various battlefields. The enemy's sources of manpower and materiel were drying up fast.

In our exchange of views with heads of the Combat Operations Department, the Intelligence Department and the Central Organising Group on the afternoon of January 6, 1974 we came to the following conclusions:

1. The battle situation was changing in our favour more quickly than had been anticipated especially in the 5th Zone and eastern Nam Bo;

2. The Phuoc Long victory marked a new stage of development in our scale of operations, and pointed to the rapid disintegration of the Saigon army and the slim possibility of a renewed US commitment to South Vietnam, including air intervention;

3. The secrecy of our operational and strategic plans had been well maintained. Thanks to the dedication of our liaison staff, our coders and our effective diversionary tactics, the enemy had been unable to detect the main direction of our attacks and the size of the forces involved;

4. The Phuoc Long victory strengthened our confidence in the practicability and success of our strategic plan. It portended even greater successes in the second phase when many vast regions would be liberated. Accordingly, there arose an urgent need to revise the original plan to make it more compatible with the strategic target and this new situa-

tion, especially with the new strategic guideline from the Politburo, i.e., that we should win more quickly;

5. Our long-term concern, i.e. the shortage of large shells, had been partly solved thanks to repeated victories. An ammunition dump containing more than 10,000 shells seized from the enemy at Phuoc Long was the first asset replenishing our ammunition reserves. Our plan was to push on and capture enemy stores at Mai Hac De in Buon Ma Thuot, the military complex at Danang and the Long Binh general store ⁽²⁴⁾. Once again, the guideline of "feeding war on war and fighting while equipping ourselves" as laid down by the Party had been proven correct and became a reality on the battlefield. In fact, our courageous fighters at the front had solved some major problems, something which we in the rear had not expected.

On January 7, 1975, Le Duan addressed the conference for a second time.

He said, "At its first meeting the Politburo reached consensus on the strategic direction aimed at taking our resistance against US aggression to total victory. This time the Politburo has discussed in depth the situation with the comrades on the battlefields. All of us have agreed on an assessment of the situation in all areas since the signing of the Paris Agreement, on the balance of forces between us and the enemy, and on this historic opportunity.

"We have all affirmed the strategic determination of our Party to complete the national people's democratic revolution in South Vietnam within 1975 or 1976 and also defined the targets and specific steps for the realisation of that objective.

"In my first speech I touched on these crucial questions. Today I will not repeat them all but only sum up the issues you have mentioned and add a few remarks reaffirming the

determination of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee."

After pointing to the factors leading to our success and the new possibilities opened up by the Paris Agreement, Le Duan analysed the new advantages which we had created for ourselves in many areas: the initiative on the battlefield, the advantageous strategic position from the North to South, the building up and reinforcement of mobile main force units, adequate strategic reserves on the major battlefields, and the improved situation on the plains which has provided us with jumping-off points around the big cities, especially on the Nam Bo plains where we had built up a number of major main-force units which had not existed before. The political movement which had been launched under the watchword of peace, independence and national reconciliation had received an enthusiastic response from broad sections of the population.

We continued to win more and more support from the revolutionary and progressive people of all social strata in South Vietnam.

But we were not without handicaps. The building up of our regular forces had not met requirements in terms of quantity, quality and equipment. In particular, we were still poorly organised in terms of co-ordinated action among the different armed services for long drawn-out battles. In the countryside, we could not yet closely combine the three prongs of attack. In many places the local armies, militia and guerrillas were still weak and could not provide a reliable mainstay for the mass movement. In the towns, the political struggle had yet to become a widespread and deeply rooted popular movement. To sum up the past two years, on account of our weaknesses in leadership and command, we still had many limitations and still revealed many shortcomings in

making the most of the favourable factors that had been created.

For their part, the enemy still retained significant strength in some areas. For instance, the Saigon army still had nearly 700,000 men under arms, including 13 regular divisions. The enemy continued to control most major cities and also a sizeable part of the richest and most densely populated rural areas. The Saigon regime continued to receive substantial military and economic aid from the United States and were militarily controlled through the system of US advisers. Nevertheless, the enemy situation was deteriorating with each passing day. This was manifest in several aspects. The Saigon army, from the main force down to local armies, such as the civil guard and militia, were no longer able to keep tight control over the population. The level of co-ordination among its various armed services had deteriorated, while the morale of the Saigon army was seriously declining. The areas under enemy control were being furiously contested by our forces, and their pacification strategy was facing complete bankruptcy; their political and economic situation, especially in the towns, was now more chaotic than ever.

Taking all this into account, it could be safely assumed that Nguyen Van Thieu's days were numbered.

I must say that this was the result of long years of struggle full of hardship and sacrifices for our people, and never before had we created such favourable conditions for a combined offensive on the enemy in both the military and political areas. The situation had changed radically compared with a couple of years earlier. With the pull-out by the American army, the Saigon administration and army were left without material and moral support. Meanwhile, our armed forces had matured considerably and were present everywhere. The population in enemy-held areas was ready to rise up.

The year 1974 witnessed a serious decline in the Saigon regime. If we were to intensify our attacks we would surely be able to generate a new impetus in order to accelerate this downhill trend among the enemy.

Our task ahead was to seize this historic opportunity, launch repeated co-ordinated campaigns in order to deal decisive blows and bring to a victorious conclusion the resistance against US aggression for national salvation, and proceed to the reunification of our motherland so that the whole country might eventually advance to socialism. While carrying out this strategic task we should not lose sight of our responsibility towards the revolutions in Laos and Cambodia.

To translate this determination into reality, the following had to be done. We had to launch a general offensive and wide-scale uprising, wipe out more enemy military subsectors and district headquarters, defeat their pacification programme and bring most of the rural areas on the Nam Bo plains under our control. The 5th Zone and Tri-Thien must launch major military offensives involving several armed services to break the "backbone" of the Saigon army, combine military action with attacks on enemy pacification teams in the countryside and move closer to the big cities, especially Saigon where we should expand the political struggle for peace and national reconciliation, step up agitation among enemy troops, and destroy more of the enemy's logistical bases and war materiel. We must not lose sight of our ultimate aim of creating an integrated force as a prerequisite for the general offensive and uprising and defeating the enemy right at their last and best-defended hideout – Saigon – in order to end the war.

This final battle would be waged by all military and political forces in South Vietnam including those in the

Saigon-Gia Dinh area. It was also a battle for the army and people throughout the country in which the decisive role would be played by the main forces of the South and the regular army from other battlefields.

Le Duan reminded us of the plan of action for 1975 and the tasks for each battlezone. He stressed the need to direct all our efforts towards the ultimate and common goal which was the strategic show-down at the last hide-out of the enemy. He also pointed to the need for both South and North to prepare a contingency plan to cope with the possibility of the Americans resuming their air and naval bombardment although this was very unlikely. But even though there was only a 5 per cent probability of this, we had to take every precaution because the US had not yet abandoned its colonialist aims against Vietnam.

He added: "In the North, the great rear base, the Party Central Committee and the government will do all that can be done to ensure an adequate supply in manpower, resources and military equipment, regarding these as the prime conditions for winning the final battle. But more important still is how to gain the necessary strategic reserves, to recruit at least 300,000 men for the paramilitary forces, urgently train new recruits and ensure efficient political education among the army and the people under the slogan "All for the front, all for the final victory".

We must be very skilful and tactful in the struggle on the diplomatic front, he added.

He stressed, "A lot remains to be done after this conference. The General Staff must perfect the offensive strategy and make more specific its organisation of implementation, such as how to build up our forces and position them on the battlefields, how to ensure reliable

logistics and so on. In this decisive battle the General Staff has a very major responsibility...".

He concluded: "This strategic show-down will be of vital importance in the life of our nation. It will bring our war of resistance against the US to final victory, contribute to changing the situation in Indochina and the whole of Southeast Asia, and open a new stage in the development of the revolution of the world's peoples. Our Party is resolved to accomplish our glorious historic mission towards the nation and to discharge in an exemplary manner our noble internationalist obligation."

"Huge difficulties and hardships lie ahead but by developing our nation's tradition of heroism and creativity we are certain to overcome all obstacles and we will win".

Right after the conference, the General Staff set about perfecting the operational plan for 1975, in which the most hotly debated issue was where we should direct our first blow. At the conference, Le Duan had already given the following general guideline:

"In the 5th Military Zone and the Central Highlands, we will use three main force divisions to attack the enemy in the Central Highlands and open a corridor to link the south of the Tay Nguyen with eastern Nam Bo, thus creating conditions for the regular army to move rapidly to eastern Nam Bo and join up with the South Vietnam Liberation Army to attack Saigon. We shall strike first at Buon Ma Thuot, and push straight on to Tuy Hoa and Phu Yen in order to split the enemy on the plains of the 5th Zone, thus creating another thrust towards the south to encircle Saigon".

I remembered that Le Duan had expressed the same idea at the conference in Do Son. A few months later, Le Trong Tan, then deputy general Chief of Staff and director

of the Military Institute, had also asked the field commanders this question: if we chose the Tay Nguyen as the main starting point of our offensive, then where should the first target be?

A few opted for Kontum or Duc Lap while the majority of those present opted for Buon Ma Thuot.

No one proposed a direct onslaught on the northern Tay Nguyen; instead all suggested that we should strike first at the enemy garrison in the southern Tay Nguyen in the area of Buon Ma Thuot.

At a later conference of key officers of the General Staff presenting the strategic plan already approved by the Politburo, when Le Duan suggested that we should choose Buon Ma Thuot, everyone applauded because this was actually what they had in mind.

As well as further amending the strategic operational plan, together with the Operations Department we tried to gather more information about the enemy and evaluate their forces. What was really the enemy's strength in the Central Highlands? Would the US come to the rescue of the Saigon army if the latter were hit hard in the Tay Nguyen, and if it did, how significant would its intervention be?

Phan Ham, deputy head of the Operations Department, held a series of meetings with key officers of the Personnel Department, General Logistics Department and other departments and ministries concerned to review preparations and make the necessary amendments.

I was particularly impressed by the importance attached to political and organisational work by the Central Military Committee, especially with regard to main force units. I still remember that at a meeting on January 9, 1975 to discuss the operational plan for the second drive of the 1974-1975 dry

season offensive, it was agreed that the first target of our attacks would be the Central Highlands, Buon Ma Thuot being the curtain-raiser. The Standing Office of the Central Military Committee emphasised the following vital points in the area of political and ideological work:

1. To be determined to overcome all hardship and accept all sacrifices in order to win the greatest victory, to guard against complacency or wavering;

2. To aim chiefly at destroying the enemy's forces through lightning and economical attacks while stepping up the political awareness campaign among the enemy ranks;

3. To uphold the spirit of co-operation among different units and armed services and different battlefields;

4. To strictly observe combat discipline and all regulations and policies concerning newly liberated areas, prisoners of war and the spoils of war;

5. To attach importance to the training of personnel during battle itself, in order to ensure rapid reinforcement for the continuous battle until final victory.

Following the conference of the Politburo and the January 9 conference of the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee all Ministry of Defence activities were directed towards the main battlefield.

Subsequent events illustrated more clearly than ever the great capabilities and creativity of the enlightened masses, much greater than we had anticipated. Through probing military actions prior to the curtain-raiser battle at Buon Ma Thuot, the operational plan was constantly amended and perfected, especially through the battle of wits in March 1975.

CHAPTER V

THE BATTLE OF WITS, MARCH 1975

A month after the Phuoc Long victory, on February 5 Van Tien Dung set off for the Central Highlands. By decision of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, Dung, together with Dinh Duc Thien, head of the Logistics Department, Le Ngoc Hien, deputy General Chief of Staff, and a number of other high officers from the General Staff and the various armed services, would form a representative office of the High Command and of the Central Military Committee codenamed Group A75. The group also included many experienced communications workers.

The group arrived at the headquarters of the Central Highlands Front Command on February 13. Le Ngoc Hien had arrived earlier to study the situation at the front and give further instructions on preparations.

To ensure secrecy for the group's itinerary, we did not contact the group over the radio but through the B3 Command which would relay information and instructions from the High Command and General Staff to the group. We attached particular importance to sending them the latest information about the enemy.

Through our intelligence network we learned that Nguyen Van Thieu had held an emergency meeting with his generals in Saigon on February 18. Two remarks by the enemy at this conference drew particular attention from us.

Firstly, they thought we would launch a spring-summer offensive in the near future aimed at neutralizing their pacification strategy and regaining lost territory and population on all battlefields, mostly in the 2nd Military Zone.

Secondly, Nguyen Van Thieu had asked his lieutenants to take precautions against an attack by us on Quang Duc, Pleiku and Kontum which would be the main targets. As for Buon Ma Thuot, this would be only a support target, if ever we chose to attack.

On February 22, following a meeting of the General Staff reviewing our situation in order to report to the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee, we sent another radio message to B3 to inform them of the latest news on the enemy situation as a basis for the field commanders to make a more comprehensive assessment.

After reviewing the main points concerning the enemy's forces in the southern part of the 1st Military Zone (Quang Da) and around Saigon as well as their resident forces in each military zone, and on the setbacks experienced by the enemy in the "Special Uprising" campaign, especially in the main areas of the 5th Interzone, eastern Nam Bo and the Mekong River delta, we discussed the US situation and made a preliminary assessment of enemy intentions concerning our strategic plan, especially regarding the situation in the Central Highlands.

The US administration was asking Congress to increase military aid to Nguyen Van Thieu. It had sent more military personnel and advisors to South Vietnam including 340 Air Force personnel. The US also secretly shipped more weapons and ammunition to the Saigon administration and introduced more B52 bombers into Thailand. It was also reported that the US had organized an airlift of weapons to Pleiku and

Kontum airports. Three to four C141 transport planes were making night landings every three days at Kontum airport.

On the strategic front, the enemy assumed that we would increase our attacks compared with 1974 but probably below the 1972 level, and that we would try to occupy a number of district military headquarters and townships but would be careful not to alarm the US to the point that it would think re-intervention was unavoidable. The enemy also thought we would strike in both military zones but mainly the 2nd Zone, with the aim of liberating the towns of Pleiku and Kontum before the rainy season. The enemy had also detected the fact that we were making active preparations at Quang Duc and Buon Ma Thuot and presumed that we would move Division 968 to Pleiku and Division 320 to Darlac. They also anticipated that we would intensify our action in the southern part of Tri-Thien and the southwestern part of Danang. But overall, the enemy still had to find out what our strategic aim was and the direction of our main attacks.

As for the timing of the offensive, the enemy thought we would start on the occasion of the Lunar New Year and continue until the end of June 1975. This was why they also changed the disposition of their tactical forces in the northern Central Highlands and southwestern Danang. Their strategic disposition remained unchanged.

We also reported to the group on the movements of the enemy's air force in Southeast Asia and the coming naval exercise by SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation).

We accorded special importance to reporting to the group on the army recruitment situation. In fact, at the end of 1974 and in early 1975, after information on the Politburo resolution and the decision of the army conference was semi-nated widely to the entire people of the North, an unprece-

dented movement to join the army sprang up in all localities. Many young women volunteered to defer their weddings so that their young men could join the army. Most demobilised soldiers volunteered to return to their units.

Basing ourselves on reports from the localities we estimated that the recruitment target for 1975 could be achieved by the end of April, and that by the end of 1975 or early 1976 the recruitment target for 1976 would also be achieved.

Information coming from Group A 75 was also very encouraging. Van Tien Dung sent us a message saying that everything had gone according to plan and that our troops in the Central Highlands were ready for major action.

On March 17 Van Tien Dung's message reached us together with a messenger from Group A75 reporting on the operational plan to the Ministry of Defence.

Before the group left I was present at discussions between Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung on tactics to be applied during the Central Highlands campaign.

They reached a consensus that we had to capture Buon Ma Thuot first if the enemy were off their guard there. Then we should move quickly to capture other positions. Surprise would be the foremost element in winning the first battle, they pointed out. Subsequent battles must ensure the destruction of as much of the enemy's forces as possible and they must be waged at the most vital points of the enemy's defence perimeter.

It should be recalled that according to the original strategic plan, we had intended to liberate the Central Highlands in 1975, that is in the first phase of the two-year plan. This was to be along with the capture of a series of enemy positions in the east and the expansion of the liberated areas in the Mekong River delta as well as on the plains of the 5th Military Zone and Tri-Thien.

But our disposition of forces in the Central Highlands theatre did not fully coincide with the plans of the General Staff. When Group A75 arrived in the area, most of our forces had been deployed from Duc Lap to Dak Song, aimed at annihilating enemy forces along the road and liberating this section of Highway 14 and clearing the way for the transportation of strategic supplies to B2.

Thus, after careful study of the battle disposition, the commanders in Group A75 decided not to redeploy forces, something which would retard the whole campaign and might reveal our strategy to the enemy. Orders came to strike Duc Lap first and take on Buon Ma Thuot right on the following day. Thanks to effective diversionary tactics the enemy was caught completely off guard. Not until the afternoon of March 9 when we opened fire on Duc Lap did the enemy sound the alert. Still they could not make out what our main target would be. Even if they did know our intention it was too late for them to send reinforcements to Buon Ma Thuot because each of Highways 19, 14, and 21 had been cut by our forces.

Our intelligence department kept close tabs on enemy activity after we struck at Duc Lap. We monitored intelligence both on the ground and from enemy radios. All this information was sorted, compared and subjected to analysis.

The briefing at High Command headquarters in Hanoi on the morning of March 10 took place in an atmosphere of very high spirits. First reports said our army had occupied Duc Lap, Dak Song and Nui Lua in the 5th Military Zone and were dislodging the enemy from the eastern Truong Son supply route. In the northern part of the Central Highlands we had taken the enemy's Phuong An district headquarters. On Highway 19 our men had closed in on the western part of the town of Pleiku.

As a rule, reports about enemy reaction always attracted the keenest attention. We were told that at a meeting on the morning of March 9 Saigon army generals in the Central Highlands had still believed that our action at Duc Lap and our digging in around Buon Ma Thuot were only diversionary measures, and that in the following days we would possibly concentrate on Pleiku and Kontum. Accordingly, they were actually focusing all their defensive efforts in the northern part of the Central Highlands.

They had made their first and fatal mistake. They withdrew part of their forces in the southern part of the Central Highlands to reinforce Pleiku, thus leaving Buon Ma Thuot even more vulnerable.

A few days earlier, there had been real concern among the General Staff when it was learned that some of our men had been captured by enemy forces who also seized some personal effects dropped by our combatants on Highway 14 while infiltrating the southern part of Buon Ma Thuot. But this concern was alleviated when we learned that the enemy was continuing to conserve their forces in order to reinforce Pleiku and Kontum.

Even more conspicuous was the process of rapid demoralisation among enemy troops over the first ten days of fighting. All indications were that they were frightened by our fire-power. The Southern Military Command thus decided to push on with the offensive.

Vo Nguyen Giap enquired in more detail about the other battlefields, especially those in the Mekong River delta. There were indications that the enemy were trying by every means possible to beef up their regular forces through upgrading their civil guards and militia. But they had obviously run out of manpower, thus leaving many parts of the

countryside vulnerable to our attacks. This could not help but draw special attention from the members of the Central Military Committee. For our part, thanks to good co-ordination of the three prongs of attack in recent days, our position in the Mekong River delta had greatly improved. A series of enemy posts had been overrun, many villages had been liberated and thousands of families of Saigon army troops had joined the political campaign. Deserters from enemy ranks were being helped by the people to return to their native villages, thousands of people joining the guerrillas in stopping enemy traffic on Highway 4.

The battle for Buon Ma Thuot began in the small hours of the morning of March 10, 1975. First reports said that the battle was progressing well. Each advance by our men was recorded on a location map. Buon Ma Thuot was the focus of attention for the Politburo, the Central Military Committee and all concerned offices of the General Staff and other departments of the Defence Ministry.

The first meeting of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee after the start of the Buon Ma Thuot battle was held on the morning of March 11, 1975.

The Politburo and the Central Military Committee heard a report on developments on the battlefield over the first ten days and discussed the ensuing steps.

The meeting was unanimous in assessing that the morale of the Saigon army was continuing to plunge, its fighting strength had greatly diminished and its defence was in serious jeopardy while we were in our best-ever form and the dry season in the South was favourable for military action by our forces. The Politburo stressed the need to rapidly consolidate newly-liberated areas in anticipation of enemy counter-attacks, and to extend our control around Buon Ma

Thuot in order to liberate the whole of Darlac province. For the time being, we should be in no hurry to push southward.

The general feeling was that we could win more quickly than had been anticipated.

Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho and Le Thanh Nghi suggested that we should encourage a popular uprising in Tri-Thien and Hue to support forthcoming military operations there.

Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap pointed to new factors emerging on the battlefield which must be seized upon in order to press forward. .

At the end, Le Duan concluded :

" The Buon Ma Thuot victory indicates the real possibility of beating the two-year deadline. But it also requires much greater effort in every field. We should decide whether or not Buon Ma Thuot should now be considered as the curtain-raiser for the general strategic offensive. We now have two army corps in the South plus one other in the North. We should make the best use of our forces in order to deal Saigon a mortal blow when the opportunity presents itself".

That afternoon an officer on duty handed me a radio message from the South. It was from Van Tien Dung. He informed us that our troops had completely liberated Buon Ma Thuot and Duc Lap and the whole area from Duc Lap to Dac Soong. The enemy had been caught completely off guard. We had taken nearly 1,000 prisoners and seized a huge quantity of arms including 12 artillery pieces and nearly 100 tonnes of artillery ammunition.

Our men were pursuing fleeing enemy troops and taking on surrounding enemy outposts. I could see why the commanders on the Tay Nguyen battlefield took such care to mention the amount of ammunition for big guns we had

captured from the enemy.

One hundred tonnes of artillery shells was not much considering the probable scale of the battles ahead. But it constituted an invaluable reinforcement for us in the circumstances.

On that same afternoon, Vo Nguyen Giap sent a message to Van Tien Dung.

He hailed the victory and continued :

"This morning before your message came, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee had held a meeting to assess the situation, and came to the following conclusions :

a- The strategic campaign strategy worked out by the Politburo and the Central Military Committee was accurate and the preparations had been, generally speaking, good.

b- Our victory in Buon Ma Thuot, Duc Lap and on Highway 19 proves that we can fight on and win greater victories and, in particular, we should capitalize on the rapidly-sinking morale of the enemy.

It is therefore necessary to act more promptly and decisively in the present and subsequent battles".

He concluded by conveying the Politburo's congratulations and commendations to all officers, men and people who had taken part in the battle.

Our diversionary tactics had paid off and the enemy had surmised our intentions quite wrongly, and now they were thrown into complete passivity.

At noon on March 12, the High Command informed Van Tien Dung, Hoang Minh Thao and the Standing Office of the Regional Committee of Tay Nguyen region that, according to our intelligence reports, the enemy were planning to regroup in order to recapture Buon Ma Thuot with the support of reinforcements and the air force. The reports said

that Inter-Group (Regiment) 45, together with the elite force of the enemy's Division 23, had been helicoptered in to Buon Ho on the afternoon of March 11 and that the Saigon air force was being mobilized up to the highest level. The High Command ordered a greater concentration of forces to wipe out the last pockets of enemy resistance both within and outside Buon Ma Thuot plus any reinforcements.

The General Staff also informed our commands in the 5th Zone, B2, Tri-Thien and the Second Army Corps of the situation in Buon Ma Thuot and the Politburo's conclusions reached at the March 11 meeting.

The message drew attention to the need to put out of action as many of the enemy forces as possible during their flight and to destroy their reinforcements.

At a briefing on the morning of March 13, basing itself on the latest intelligence reports, the General Staff anticipated a possible strategic withdrawal by the enemy from the Central Highlands or at least a regroupment of their remaining forces to Pleiku as a last-ditch stand.

We relayed this projection to the commanders in B3 and the 5th Military Zone and also the instructions from the Central Military Committee to encircle Pleiku and make the best preparations possible for wiping out the enemy whether they regrouped around Pleiku or ordered a full-scale withdrawal from the Central Highlands.

By the morning of March 15, reports from the Intelligence Department were throwing more light on enemy intentions. Nguyen Van Thieu had ordered General Pham Van Phu to hold out at positions around Buon Ma Thuot in order to retain a base for the recapture of the town by Intergrupp 21 of their Special Forces, Regiments 44 and 45 of the 23rd Infantry Division with the support of the air force 3rd

Division based at Thanh Son (Phan Rang) airbase and Special Forces Intergruop 7 dispatched from Saigon to replace Division 23 at Pleiku.

But even before they could implement this plan, the enemy was completely trounced by our men. On March 13 they had to fly more than 200 helicopter sorties and support aircraft to drop Regiment 45 into the eastern part of Buon Ma Thuot. However, in the face of intense fire power from us, this airborne force finally had to be dropped into Phuoc An. The following day – March 14 – two battalions of this regiment were badly mauled by our forces.

At their March 15 briefing, the Intelligence Department further reported that the enemy had finally become convinced that the Central Highlands was our first target, so were determined to move their troops to the rescue from other battlefields on the assumption that we did not have many troops left on other battlefronts.

They had thus decided to send their strategic mobile forces (comprising the paratroop brigades) and a number of armoured columns to launch a fairly large-scale operation in an attempt to recapture Buon Ma Thuot. Their reinforcements would possibly come via Highway 21.

After consulting with Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, Vo Nguyen Giap sent to Van Tien Dung a message urging him to consolidate his hold on Buon Ma Thuot while quickly deploying our forces in order to destroy any remaining enemy forces in the vicinity, mainly at Phuoc An. At the same time, everything had to be made ready for intercepting and wiping out enemy reinforcements on land. Then we would move our forces to put the enemy out of action at Cheo Reo. The Buon Ma Thuot battle was actually developing into a major one aimed at destroying no fewer than two divisions of the Saigon army.

Before communications operators could send this message to the South, Vo Nguyen Giap sent an aide to recover it and added the following :

" We were about to send you this message when we received your message No.5. We have unanimously concluded that we may achieve our goal way ahead of schedule. We are actually studying your plan. Early next week, we will send you a new message after asking for instructions from the Politburo".

In his message number 5 (dated March 14) Van Tien Dung said that the officers and men on the B3 battlefield were very enthusiastic and determined to carry out to the letter the strategic decision of the Politburo and Central Military Committee. "We shall try our best to shorten the time needed and more than achieve the 1975 goal."

Van Tien Dung also said that the situation had developed too quickly while the way our officers operated had remained almost static. This had to be quickly overcome.

A new phenomenon had appeared in the enemy situation on National Highway I linking North and South Vietnam. Intelligence reports said that there had been signs of enemy troop movements from Tri-Thien to Danang. To all intents and purposes they were moving Special Forces Inter-group 14 to Quang Tri to replace a marine division which had been shifted to Danang. The need had therefore arisen to increase our firepower along Highway I from Tri-Thien southwards to check or at least delay the movement of enemy troops. Doan Tue, our artillery force commander, had been assigned to the Central Organizing Group of the General Staff since early March and was now instructed to organize a group of artillery officers headed by Luu Huong to go to Tri-Thien to discuss this contingency plan with Hoang Dan,

deputy commander of the 2nd Army Corps. After careful discussions among the General Staff, Le Trong Tan gave instructions to the field commanders of B4 (Tri-Thien Military Zone) and B5 (northern Quang Tri, west of Tri-Thien-Hu).

His message was to strike hard, put out of action many more of the enemy's forces especially along National Highway I, and to step up guerrilla warfare on the plains. These must be the immediate tasks for the Tri-Thien Military Zone.

From the 5th Military Zone, in a message to the General Staff dated March 15, Chu Huy Man also reported that the situation was changing quickly in our favour. He suggested that after taking Buon Ma Thuot, we should move on to capture Cheo Reo and Pleiku (or at least isolate them and cut off all access for their reinforcements). In the coastal areas of the 5th Military Zone, we needed to attack the enemy at Tam Ky, Tra Bong and Son Ha, then push down Highway I to liberate the northern part of the town of Quang Ngai, while striking hard at the enemy in the southern part of the province bordering on Binh Dinh. The plan for the liberation of the whole town would be decided later. In Binh Dinh province, our 3rd Division was concentrating its forces in order to attack the 42nd Division of the Saigon army. They would move southward to deny the enemy all possibilities for sending in their 22nd Division. This would create conditions for us to expand the liberated zone on the plains, increase pressure on the enemy on the perimeter of the city, and also to encircle and defeat the enemy garrison at An Khe.

On March 17, after our troops in the Central Highlands had defeated the enemy's counter-attack aimed at recapturing Buon Ma Thuot, the General Staff received instructions to prepare for a forthcoming meeting of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee.

We understood that this would be a very crucial meeting to re-evaluate the whole situation after the Buon Ma Thuot attack and decide on follow-up actions.

Having anticipated this meeting, on March 16 Van Tien Dung sent to the Politburo and the Central Military Committee a report reviewing the situation and proposing follow-up action to win decisive victory in this current dry season.

After recalling the wrong predictions by the US and the Saigon regime regarding our strategic targets and our capacity for major action, and summing up our army's significant victories in the Central Highlands as well as pointing out our limitations especially in our troops' perception of the enemy's capabilities in terms of organisation and command, Van Tien Dung proposed the following immediate major tasks to be completed in this current dry season :

1. To defend and consolidate the newly liberated areas.
2. To destroy enemy reinforcements, capture the two remaining districts of Darlac province and firmly defend Highway 21 against attempts by the enemy to clear the road.
3. To intensify our attack on Cheo Reo, encircle and close in on the enemy at Pleiku, and sever Pleiku from Kontum.
4. To combine operations with the B2 battlefront in attacking the enemy at Quang Duc, to capture Nhan Co and encircle and defeat the enemy at Gia Nghia. Meanwhile, our army in the 5th Military Zone should destroy enemy positions at An Khe in order to completely cut off Highway 19 while those on the B1 and B5 battlefronts would isolate enemy forces in Hue and Danang and close in on these cities.

The Operations Department had the message photocopied and distributed to each member of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, because Van Tien

Dung's message only came after the morning briefing on March 17 had ended. The situation had developed more quickly than we had anticipated, especially concerning the enemy's strategy of regroupment to cope with us. All of us could foresee that in the face of our onslaught the enemy would continue their regroupment of forces to Saigon, Cam Ranh and possibly Danang as well. This would be a great opportunity which had appeared much earlier than expected. The question was what the next target should be after Buon Ma Thuot. Two options were put forward :

Contingency plan 1 : After the complete or effective liberation of the Central Highlands we should move in two directions. The main direction would be eastwards and the second towards the 5th Military Zone. The first prong would consist mainly of troops from B3 and the second of existing forces from the 5th Zone possibly reinforced with Division 968 and the necessary military equipment.

Contingency plan 2 : We would use the bulk of our regular army in the Central Highlands to push eastwards toward the 5th Military Zone to liberate Binh Dinh, Phu Yen and down to Nha Trang before moving on into the eastern part of South Vietnam.

After much weighing up, Vo Nguyen Giap and the others in the General Staff opted for the first plan and asked for Politburo approval.

Another important task, we suggested, was to move the whole of the road construction army on the North - South line to Highway 14 to serve the coming fight and carry supplies to newly liberated areas.

On that same day, March 17, in its message to the Standing Office of the Regional Committee in the 4th and Tri-Thien Military Zones, the Central Military Committee,

after giving them the latest news on enemy movements, urged the army and people in Tri-Thien to step up their activities in all fields, especially to increase attacks by our main force units from the west to isolate the enemy in Hue and Danang, send more military units to the plains to launch a major political agitation movement among the masses, intensify guerrilla warfare, and move in closer to enemy positions in order to co-ordinate their actions more closely with attacks by the main force units.

That night, after satisfying ourselves that the enemy were actually withdrawing from Pleiku and Kontum, we held a brief meeting after which Le Trong Tan sent an urgent message to the Tri-Thien and 5th Military Zones, instructing them to send without delay not only battalion but regiment-sized forces to the plains in order together with local armies, militia and guerrillas and other people's forces, to destroy enemy control and capture all administrative offices including those in the most remote places. The message also instructed the Tri-Thien and 5th Military Zones to urgently capture the district headquarters in Phuc Loc and cut National-Highway 1 while making urgent preparations for attacking Danang.

The following day we learned that the enemy's 3rd Paratroop Division in Danang had withdrawn to Saigon and had been replaced by a marine division. There were also signs that the enemy might pull out of a long stretch of land from northern Hue to the Thach Han River. This meant that the enemy were carrying out a major regroupment strategy over the whole of South Vietnam and that this was a new and very serious step in the overall disintegration of the US-backed regime in Saigon. After the morning briefing, the General Staff sent the following instructions to the commanders of

the B4 and B5 battlefronts : " Do not let the enemy withdraw safely and conserve their forces. You have to move right away and cut the enemy's retreat along Highway 1; use artillery to bombard the enemy airport and storages at Phu Bai".

On the same day Van Tien Dung sent a radio message from the Central Highlands informing us that the enemy had withdrawn from Kontum and Pleiku on the morning of March 16 along Highway 7, passing through Cheo Reo. Our army had been instructed to concentrate all their firepower on blocking the enemy retreat while continuing to pursue them to Khanh Duong where they badly mauled the enemy's 23rd Division.

An urgent meeting of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee was convened on the morning of March 18. Le Duan began the meeting by exclaiming : "The situation is developing at a rate none of us has anticipated". This was also the feeling of all those present that day. Le Duan continued :

"The battle on the Central Highlands was an important test of enemy capabilities. They have met with four surprises:

1. They did not think that we dare challenge the Paris Agreement which they themselves have torn to shreds.

2. They did not expect that we would have the capability to fight to such an extent, because they thought this could happen only in 1976.

3. They guessed wrongly the direction of our attack on the Central Highlands.

4. They did not expect that their disintegration in the Central Highlands would come so soon".

He stressed that if we allowed the enemy to regroup in Saigon, this would be a very hard nut to crack. It was therefore crucial to split them, weaken and trounce them right

then during the regroupment process when their forces were still scattered over the 5th Military Zone, Mekong River delta and eastern Nam Bo. On the other hand, regroupment was a clear sign of their fast decline and would make them more vulnerable to our blows. We had to give full play to our three blows – attacks by the regular forces, attack by popular uprisings in the countryside, and attacks by popular uprisings in the towns. We had to provoke mutinies within the Saigon army. We had to muster at least nine divisions in the direction of Saigon backed up by at least four or five other divisions of reserve forces. That way our strength and circumstances would be improved many times over. Taking Saigon would be no easy task. We had to destroy at least three enemy divisions.

Regarding the B2 battlezone, the Central Military Department for South Vietnam had given the following instructions :

1. Cut Highway 4 from My Tho to Can Tho, and block enemy movements on the Cho Gao Canal.
2. Hit hard at enemy Divisions 21 and 7 to prevent them from coming to Saigon's rescue at the same time as checking and destroying reinforcements that might be sent by the enemy from Saigon to the Mekong River delta.
3. Neutralize the Tra Noc airport so that it could not be used to back up enemy forces in Saigon.
4. Make urgent preparations for popular uprisings at the same time as our forces strike at Saigon. The general guideline was that each commune, district and province should look after its own plans for an uprising, but the key areas which needed close guidance were My Tho, Can Tho and Ben Tre provinces.

While the plan was being discussed, Vo Nguyen Giap asked the Politburo to give the order to liberate the South in 1975. The situation was evolving too quickly, he said. Only ten days had passed since the curtain-raiser battle at Duc Lap. The possibility of renewed US commitment was farther away than ever before. So we should quickly deploy our forces in three directions, the main target being Saigon and the Mekong River delta. The two other main theatres were Tri-Thien - Danang and the plains of the 5th Military Zone. We should move our forces in the Central Highlands to Saigon and replenish their technical equipment, especially anti-aircraft artillery. This must be captured from the enemy because we had very little ourselves. The task of the Tri-Thien Military Zone was to cut the National Highway and isolate the enemy in Hue and Danang. Vo Nguyen Giap asked for permission to immediately send the 1st Army Corps to the front. The watch-words were "Temerity, urgency and certain victory". The overall task of the army and people was to encircle, split and destroy the enemy forces. These three operations might be carried out simultaneously or one after the other in a flexible manner. In April we had to complete the strategic encirclement of the enemy and bring about a substantial change in the strategic balance of forces.

The task assigned to the Mekong River delta and the 5th Military Zone was to trounce enemy forces engaged in pacification and extend the liberated zones. They should form a number of military units at district and provincial level and give them urgent training.

Le Duc Tho made a more detailed analysis of the US situation and the possibility of re-intervention. The difficulties the US was encountering had surpassed our expectations, and now more than ever before since it had brought its

troops to South Vietnam ten years ago, the US was less likely to re-enter Vietnam. This was manifest in the Saigon regime's plan for troop regroupment. But the enemy had not been allowed to freely carry out their plan. They had been badly mangled during the regroupment process itself. It had become evident that the Saigon army was being regrouped to defend its strategic lifelines and bases in the coastal areas. We had to hit them on both fronts – the battlefield and the countryside – where the enemy had to be split and encircled. Truong Chinh and Pham Van Dong also analyzed the enemy's irrevocable decline and further elaborated on methods for combining military and political attacks on them. All agreed that the great opportunity had appeared and we should seize upon it to win victory – the sooner the better.

The Politburo finally decided that we must complete the two-year plan within 1975. It also decided that the main target of our offensive was Saigon and the most immediate task was wiping out all enemy forces in their 1st Military Sector. In effect, with this final decision by the Politburo, the strategic offensive had now become the general and final strategic offensive.

The Politburo entrusted the Central Military Committee with the task of working out a specific programme for putting this strategic decision into practice.

On the Tuesday of the previous week, the Politburo and Central Military Committee had only been prepared to project that we could win in less than two years' time.

After the conference Vo Nguyen Giap sent a message to Van Tien Dung informing him of this decision. He did not forget to sum up the major assessment by the Politburo and the Party Central Military Committee of the enemy's current policy. This involved regrouping their troops to defend

Saigon, part of the Mekong River delta and possibly Danang and Cam Ranh ⁽²⁵⁾ in the hope of salvaging what they could at the negotiating table and retaining part of South Vietnam.

Accordingly, we had to act with the greatest urgency and secrecy to win certain victory and limit to the minimum the enemy's ability to react. It was only after much consideration that the Politburo decided on the first option (moving the bulk of forces from the B3 battlefield to eastern Nam Bo while extending the liberated zones on the plains of the 5th Military Zone, and possibly reinforcing it with Division 968 together with the necessary equipment).

No sooner had the message been dispatched than the General Staff received a message from Van Tien Dung also dated March 19. He suggested the same course of action after the liberation of the Central Highlands.

Van Tien Dung also spoke of enemy disarray after losing the Central Highlands.

The message said that it was the intention of the southern battlefield command to move our forces from the Central Highlands together with those from the 5th Military Zone to Binh Dinh and Phu Yen and part of Khanh Hoa province to put out of action more enemy forces and liberate an area of more than one million inhabitants.

He also spoke of the possibility of completely writing off Saigon's 2nd Army Corps and liberating most of their 2nd Tactical Zone. In a word, he said, we should direct our attention to reducing enemy forces to only 20 or 25 percent of their present level.

On the following day, March 20, as our troops in the Central Highlands were hotly pursuing the enemy fleeing in three directions (on Highway 7 to Phu Yen, Highway 21 to Khanh Duong and Highway 19 to An Khe), in his message

codenumbered 57 Van Tien Dung said that it was also his intention to follow the enemy in hot pursuit in three directions to the plains – Highway 7 to Phu Yen, Highway 21 to Ninh Hoa then Nha Trang and Cam Ranh and Highway 19 to Binh Dinh. He also suggested that Division 316 should be brought into action only when B2 needed more reinforcements. He added that in the present circumstances, when the situation was evolving very fast, we should not arrange a common meeting between B3, the 5th Military Zone and Nam Bo but should only send by radio the instructions from the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. If necessary, there should be messengers to take the orders to each battlefield.

After learning that the Politburo had opted for Plan I, Van Tien Dung sent his reply in which he requested further clarification of the timetable and plan for the deployment of forces on the new battlefields before the rainy season set in.

In order not to interfere with the activities of our men in the field, on March 22 the General Staff sent two consecutive messages to the commanders of the Central Highlands zone. The first message assured Van Tien Dung that the Politburo fully concurred with his plan for the deployment of B3 forces. The second message detailed the ideas of the Politburo regarding our determination to defeat the enemy's plan to regroup for the defence of Saigon and the Mekong River delta.

In another message he sent later to Van Tien Dung, Vo Nguyen Giap, secretary of the Central Military Committee, said that Le Duc Tho and Le Duan were in full agreement with his operational plan. He urged the latter to concentrate efforts on destroying enemy forces and liberating coastal provinces and towns including Nha Trang and Cam Ranh. The administration of newly-liberated areas should be given

to the localities while urgent measures should be taken to prepare for the coming battles on key battlefronts.

He also informed Van Tien Dung that messengers had been sent to B2 and the 5th Zone to inform Pham Hung and Vo Chi Cong regarding the Politburo's strategic decision and the major directions of our coming offensive.

By March 23 the enemy had been almost completely driven out of the Central Highlands.

In the 1st Tactical Zone to the north the enemy had also had to abandon Quang Tri and regroup along My Chanh River near the city of Hue.

At the communications centre in the old citadel of Hanoi, radio operators and coders worked in shifts around the clock.

At nightfall, it had become the rule that Vo Nguyen Giap would cross Hoang Dieu street and enter the western gate of the citadel where he would stay until very late at night. Often he slept there to wait for the latest news from the South and discuss the situation with us. Sometimes he stood almost as if frozen before the military map hanging on the wall of the operations room, or would pace back and forth in the yard of the former palace. We understood that he was pondering the next steps to be proposed at a meeting the next day of the Politburo or the Central Military Committee.

Also during those memorable days of March 1975, all the other members of the Politburo except those who were in the South met daily and hourly in the operations room. Often these were bilateral or trilateral exchanges of views. Less frequent were full-scale meetings because the situation was developing too fast to allow time for the convening of such a conference. For some days now the Central Military Committee had been discussing the plan to liberate Danang.

There were two possibilities; first, the enemy would quickly abandon Danang after withdrawing from Hue or, second, they would abandon it section by section. After a short discussion we all agreed to act on the first assumption. But what forces should be used in the Danang battle besides the divisions already in place? Should we move the whole of the 1st Army Corps to Danang, and was there enough time left to do that? We were pondering the optimum solution and Le Trong Tan was preparing to raise the issue at the Politburo meeting scheduled for March 25. But the news from the battlefields did not allow us to wait any longer. The Politburo decided to meet right then on the afternoon of March 24.

Tri-Thien had launched the second phase of the spring-summer military campaign three days earlier. In the northern part of Danang and in the 2nd Army Corps and the Tri-Thien Military Zone our men had strictly carried out the orders of the High Command and moved toward the plains to capture the targets set, cut off Highway I and close in on Phu Bai airport and the city of Hue. There were increasing signs that the enemy were about to pull out of Hue.

By now the army in the 5th Military Zone were into the third day of their spring-summer campaign. South of Danang our troops had captured a number of positions east of Thang Binh, completely liberating the rural areas of Son Tinh and Binh Son districts and were moving on to the town of Tam Ky.

At a meeting on the afternoon of March 24, Le Duan highlighted our landmark achievements since the signing of the Paris Agreement. Right from the outset, the military forces and the people in the 9th Zone had demonstrated great determination in resisting and destroying the enemy's pacification strategy. This was followed by the Thuong Duc battle in the 5th Zone in which we had dealt a serious blow

to the enemy's strategic mobile forces, changing the balance of forces in our favour.

Then had come the victories at Phuoc Long and in the Central Highlands which had forced the enemy to regroup and withdraw to defend Saigon.

Le Duan then raised the issue of how to fight the final battle in Saigon.

Should we wait until the arrival of the main force units from B3 or should we use only the three main force divisions and resident forces? The Hue battle would end in a few days. Then we would take on Danang where three or four divisions of the enemy were stationed. The consensus was not to wait until the capture of Hue to attack Danang but we had to use Division 711 to secure a foothold and continue to close in on the enemy at Danang. After the fall of Hue, the enemy would inevitably have to evacuate from Danang. Obviously, we had to move quickly to check the enemy's withdrawal to Saigon.

The General Staff presented its plan at a full-scale meeting on the morning of the following day, March 25.

All the members of the Politburo and Central Military Committee were present.

Le Trong Tan outlined the plan to drive the enemy from Tri-Thien and Hue within a short period of time. If we could wipe out three or four enemy divisions, cause the disintegration of the rest and capture all their military equipment, then we could call it a major victory. The enemy forces that had been regrouped in Danang comprised two divisions (one marine division and Division 3), and two or three Special Forces battle groups, all equivalent to ten regiments in troop strength. The enemy might regroup to Danang earlier than expected. We had to act quickly to defeat two or three divisions of the enemy in April if we were to prevent the

enemy from implementing their strategic plan of withdrawing to Saigon. All things considered, we faced the practical possibility of completely liberating South Vietnam according to plan and even in the autumn of 1975.

Vo Nguyen Giap speculated on enemy intentions regarding Danang. Earlier we had anticipated two possibilities. By now it was already clear that the enemy would evacuate from Danang, but the question was, what would be the speed of their withdrawal? We should prepare ourselves to act quickly in the event of a quick withdrawal. We would have to quickly occupy the high points and move the tanks closer to the city. Likewise, the artillery forces must quickly build their gun emplacements. Earlier, we had planned to use seven divisions in the attack on Saigon. Now we already had nine divisions at our disposal. Three more divisions would be forthcoming. After capturing Danang we would have 15 divisions in all. The strategy required that we had to capture Saigon no later than May 1975. Our forces from Long An province would exert pressure from the southwest. There must be a larger and stronger force from the northwest. He concluded that if we could move our forces in more quickly we might finish up in Saigon before the end of May.

Pham Van Dong again stressed the need to act quickly and win quickly. Military equipment was important but the force must be competent and well-trained, he said. To deal staggering military blows was important but this must be combined with popular uprisings if we were to secure certain victory.

Le Duc Tho recalled that our earlier strategic decision had been to completely liberate the South within two years.

There had been no change in strategic direction but we could and should bring the deadline forward. We had to deal the enemy three successive blows, in the Central Highlands,

at Danang and in Saigon within just one year. The general offensive had already begun with the Central Highlands battle and would end in Saigon. After the Danang battle we still had two reserve divisions and a lot of ammunition. Our transport capacity had greatly improved. We had to begin the Saigon battle right now. Our forces in B2 had actually surrounded Saigon. Only the resident forces were still below strength.

Truong Chinh said he agreed with the General Staff plan but stressed the need to act more firmly and urgently, to progress by leaps and bounds. The current success was just the continuation of the success of spring 1968, the strategic offensive of 1972 and the outcome of more than a decade of resistance against the US.

Le Duan dwelt on the need to organize popular uprisings. If the popular uprising in Danang went as scheduled the enemy would collapse in disarray and their headquarters in Saigon would be seriously threatened.

After analysing the enemy's forces and our own, the Politburo concluded that the great strategic opportunity had arrived. Never before in our 20 years of resistance against US aggression had we found ourselves in such favourable circumstances.

The revolutionary war in South Vietnam had entered a period of lightning progress. The conference expected that we could win victory much earlier than originally scheduled. We had to make the most of the remaining months of the dry season. Any delay would invite difficulties.

On the basis of this assessment, the Politburo ordered **that** we act boldly and with great urgency so as to outmanoeuvre the enemy and take them completely by surprise, liberating Saigon before the rainy season set in.

To that end, we still had to fight two major battles, one in Hue-Danang and the other in Saigon. The Danang battle would lay the foundations for the victory in Saigon.

The Politburo and the Central Military Committee decided to launch the attack on Danang, appoint Le Trong Tan as commander and Chu Huy Man as political commissar, and form the 3th Army Corps with Vu Lang as commander and Dang Vu Hiep as political commissar. We in General Staff made urgent preparations for the Danang battle plans to be presented to the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee the next day, March 26. We also discussed the plan for supplies to the front with the General Logistics Department. A total of 26,000 tonnes of supplies were now ready to be sent southwards.

By now the Aid to the South Council had been set up with Pham Van Dong as its chairman. A similar action had been taken more than 20 years earlier. When the winter-spring 1953-1954 strategic offensive reached its climax the Politburo had decided to capture the Dien Bien Phu stronghold from the French army. An Aid to the Front Council was then also formed, with Pham Van Dong as chairman with the aim of mobilizing material and manpower for the decisive battle under the slogan "All for the Front, all for Victory". History seemed to be repeating itself. The council was set up with great determination to liberate Saigon and the whole of South Vietnam.

The Aid to the South Council assumed all the more importance after it was decided that the liberation of Saigon must be completed before the rainy season. The problem of a shortage of ammunition for artillery, which had been of the greatest concern to all staff and logistics offices, had been overcome. All units had been instructed to place special emphasis on the capture and maintenance of large shells.

The various departments of the General Staff sent their most experienced officers to help Le Trong Tan in the command of the Quang Da battlefield.

Our greatest concern at this time was how to ensure a meeting between Le Trong Tan who was about to leave Hanoi and Chu Huy Man who was arriving from the 5th Military Zone, in order to co-ordinate action in the command of the Quang Da battle. By now our troops had begun to enter the city of Hue.

As early as the middle of March, given the favourable development of the military situation in the Central Highlands, the High Command had directed the 5th Military Zone command to intensify their attacks north of the zone and quickly deploy our troops on the National Highway after capturing a number of enemy positions in contested areas.

When we detected the fact that the enemy was sending their marines to Danang to replace the paratroop division which was sent to the south as a mobile force, the General Staff repeatedly ordered the Tri-Thien Military Zone and the 2nd Army Corps to take our troops across the enemy's outer defence perimeter and move to the plains to destroy the enemy's power system, cut the National Highway and capture the district headquarters at Phu Loc and Huong Dien, then move on to the port of Cua Thuan to encircle the airport and close in on Hue, leaving the enemy's 1st Division no chance of escape.

During the period from March 22 to 26 (by now we had liberated Hue, surrounded the enemy along the Cua Thuan and Tu Hien estuaries and exerted strong pressure on the enemy at Danang from the north) the General Staff busied itself with circulating the March 24 instruction by the Central Military Committee to the 5th Inter-military Zone, directing the army there to move quickly to Danang and combine

operations with the 2nd Army Corps to form a pincer movement from several directions. The instruction also said that the 2nd Army Corps had to make every preparation so that on March 27 our artillery could bombard Danang airport and port, at the same time occupying the Hai Van Pass area as a springboard for occupying the Lien Chieu oil depot, and finally moving into Danang to wipe out enemy resistance there.

All subsequent messages from the High Command to the Tri-Thien and Quang Da battlefronts bore the same sense of urgency, urging the army to move quickly into Danang.

In Tri-Thien, at the meeting on March 17, the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee of the army and battlefront came to the conclusion that the enemy was wavering and a new opportunity had appeared. The meeting decided to launch frontal assaults on the enemy defence line while sending strong regular army units to combine with the local army and militia to cut Highway I, prevent the enemy from regrouping and close in on the enemy at Hue. On March 19 the Quang Tri liberation forces completely liberated the remaining tract of land in that province. The following day the Standing Office of the Regional Military Committee in Tri-Thien decided to field the remaining reserves to join the 2nd Army Corps in completely liberating Thua Thien province including Hue, at the same time giving effective support to the popular uprising. In the face of strong pressure from us, the enemy withdrew from Hue on the night of March 24 to Cua Thuan and Tu Hien. The following day, with strong backing from our armed forces the population of Hue rose up and guided the army to capture one by one all the enemy's strategic positions in the city. On the 25th, our

armed forces, supported by artillery, pounded the enemy at Cua Thuan and Tu Hien and pursued those fleeing by sea, capturing most of them.

In the 5th Military Zone, the meeting on March 16 of the Regional Military Committee and the Military Zone Command decided that the objective of the second drive in the spring-summer campaign was to liberate most rural areas in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces. Seven days later, after we had liberated part of Thang Binh district and the plains of Son Tinh and Binh Son districts, the Standing Office of the Regional Military Committee decided to liberate the whole of the 5th Military Zone "in the shortest possible period of time". After five days of fighting we had liberated the town of Tam Ky, occupied the Tuan Duong base and strengthened our foothold in the east of Quang Nam, completely liberated Quang Ngai province and attacked Chu Lai base, wiping out two divisions of the Saigon army.

Thus the southern part of the enemy's 1st Military Zone had been liberated and Danang came under heavy pressure from both north and south.

Fully grasping the guiding thoughts of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, the Tri-Thien and 5th Zone, joining forces with the 2nd Army Corps, had fought with great effect in coordination with the battlezone in the highlands. We had wiped out an important part of the enemy's forces in their 1st Military Zone and made active preparations for a crucial battle – the liberation of Danang.

With the liberation of Hue, Tam Ky and Chu Lai, and the wiping out or disintegration of the main force of the 1st Division of the Saigon army we had disrupted an important part of the enemy's strategy of regrouping in the coastal area of central Vietnam and encircled the enemy in Danang from

all directions. The enemy had had to abandon their plans to withdraw a marine division from Danang and gather their remaining forces to defend the city, their last base and most important defensive position in the 1st Military Zone, in an attempt to check our advance and gain time to consolidate their defence in the south. Though their troop strength remained significant – 100,000 men under arms – the enemy had actually been isolated, their morale was sinking fast and their command system had completely disintegrated. Tens of thousands of people streaming in disorder into Danang from Hue and Tri-Thien worsened the chaotic enemy situation.

By March 27 the situation of the enemy in Danang had become desperate. Orders came to take draconian measures to outflank the enemy from the south and make a direct thrust into Danang, bypassing enemy positions on the road. The High Command also ordered the 2nd Army Corps to increase pressure from the northwest and quickly install more artillery to pound enemy forces at the airport and sea port in order to prevent them from withdrawing safely. A mobile task force followed Highways 14 and I to take on the western and northwestern sector of the town and quickly occupied the Trinh Minh The bridge, thus cutting off the enemy's retreat to Son Tra Peninsula.

The population inside the city rose up to coordinate actions with the Liberation Army in its drive toward the western sector of the town. Thousands of people rode out in buses, cars and even on motorbikes to transport our soldiers into the town. Tens of thousands of others brought food and drink to the road to offer to our combatants. Guided by Danang's self-defence forces, our army made straight for the main targets in the city like the town hall, airport, air force command headquarters, headquarters of Saigon's 1st Army

Corps and so on and quickly landed on the Son Tra Peninsula. At the same time, our underground guerrilla and self-defence forces which had been operating clandestinely in the town for quite a long time, occupied other important enemy positions. Political prisoners detained at the Non Nuoc prison broke down the prison doors and joined the army and guerrillas in calling on the remaining enemy soldiers to surrender. They also went to important installations to prevent sabotage and looting.

By three o'clock on the afternoon of March 29, our army had destroyed or caused the disbandment of more than 100,000 enemy troops in the military complex in Danang and completely liberated the city.

On March 30, a team of officers from the Military Science Institute and the Operations, Intelligence and Militia Departments left Hanoi for Danang to study experiences gained in command, logistics and mobilisation during a large - scale campaign to liberate a big city.

Under the impact of the severe blows they had suffered in the Central Highlands and Danang, the Saigon administration chiefs in Binh Dinh, Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa provinces decided to save their skins by fleeing. Meanwhile, the Americans began the withdrawal of their offices and consulate from Nha Trang to Cam Ranh. We received intelligence reports that the Americans were soon to abandon Cam Ranh.

The 3rd Army Corps and other units, after liberating the Central Highlands, were ordered to push southwards to liberate the coastal provinces of central Vietnam.

From March 26 to April 3, the regular army, in coordination with the local armies and people, routed the remnants of the 2nd Saigon Army Corps, liberated Binh Dinh (March 31, 1975, including Quy Nhon on April 1) Phu Yen

(including Tuy Hoa on April 1) and Khanh Hoa (including Nha Trang and the Cam Ranh naval base) on the same day.

At the same time, on the B2 battlefield, our army encircled and forced the enemy to withdraw from An Loc, Chau Thanh and Gia Nghia. The 7th Division, the main unit of our army in South Vietnam, followed Highway 20 and in coordination with the forces of the 6th Military Zone, liberated the towns of Di Linh, Bao Loc and Dalat.

On March 31, the Politburo decided to push on and liberate the last hide-out of the enemy – Saigon.

This historic decision was made on the basis of a detailed report on developments over the past few weeks, especially during the last days of March.

All told, from the Central Highlands to Hue, Danang and other support theatres, we routed or caused the disintegration of more than 35 per cent of enemy forces. We put out of action two military zones, two army corps comprising about 40 per cent of the enemy's technical equipment destroyed or captured more than 40 per cent of their logistical bases, and liberated 12 provinces, bringing the total population of the liberated zones to nearly eight million.

The Politburo meeting pointed out that the popular masses were ready to join with the army in overthrowing the Saigon administration, and that the bulk of the Saigon army's officers and men were demoralized. This explained why within only 32 hours, using an armed force inferior in strength to the enemy's, we had destroyed the enemy's most important military complex in central Vietnam.

The meeting affirmed that we had definitely become stronger than the enemy in strategic position, military strength and political forces. The Saigon regime was in danger of complete collapse. The Americans had proved to

be completely helpless and they could not save the situation even if they wanted to. The revolution in our country was moving at the speed of "one day equalling 20 years". The opportunity to launch a general assault and uprising had come.

The Politburo decided "to firmly seize the strategic opportunity under the watchwords 'lightning advance, boldness, certain victory', determined to launch a general assault and general uprising at the earliest date possible, most probably in April and no later".

We understood that our main asset now was time. The Politburo also decided that, in the matter of battle tactics, it was essential to give full scope to the strength of the three strategic blows (the regular army, the rural areas and the towns), combining military attack with popular uprising, attacking from outside and from within, concentrating the biggest force possible in each battle, and making the most of the new conditions to add to our victories.

On strategic disposition, the Politburo decided to accelerate the implementation of the policy already agreed on, which was to urgently increase our troop strength to the west of Saigon, to quickly cut through and encircle enemy forces to the southwest, to close in quickly on Saigon, completely cut Highway 4, and isolate Saigon from the Mekong River delta; at the same time, concentrate our forces in the east to occupy crucial points in order to completely isolate Saigon from Ba Ria and Vung Tau; and to get the most powerful force ready, including modern technical equipment, in order to strike directly at the most vital bases of the puppet regime right in Saigon when the occasion presented itself. In the meantime, the armed forces in the Mekong River delta would provide strong support for the popular uprisings in order to liberate as many localities as possible.

The Politburo decided to send the 3rd Army Corps down to the plains from the Central Highlands and to send the 1st Army Corps, the strategic reserve, from the north.

In the area of command organization, the Politburo decided to establish a Saigon front Command and Party Committee in order to unify command.

CHAPTER VI

ALL FOR THE KEY BATTLEFRONT

The atmosphere at military headquarters in Hanoi became even more animated after the historic meeting of the Politburo on March 31, 1975.

The General Staff decided that in the days ahead it had to concentrate on the following main tasks which bore on the final strategic battle: first, to provide leadership for army detachments moving along coastal roads to assigned places of regroupment while fighting the enemy; second, to direct the transportation of major forces to their assigned positions as soon as possible in order to get ready for the Saigon battle; and third, to make the final strategic battle as economical as possible in terms of human life.

With the first and second tasks, the General Staff had to fulfil at the same time two seemingly conflicting strategies regarding detachments which were moving south along the southern coast of central Vietnam.

The first was to prevent the enemy from regrouping to defend Saigon. By so doing, we would also extend the liberated zone including the Cam Ranh naval base and prevent the enemy from destroying equipment there and forcing the population to follow them as they withdrew.

The other task consisted of accelerating the movement of troops along the coast in order to arrive at the regroupment centres in time for the Saigon battle.

In implementing this general guideline, the case of Division 10 (part of the 3rd Army Corps, Central Highlands) was all-important.

On his way to South Vietnam, Le Duc Tho on April 1 ordered this division to move directly from the Central Highlands to the Saigon area. But two days earlier, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee had decided to alter the plan for this division. It should whittle down enemy paratroop strength and the remaining enemy forces on Highway 21, and move to the coast to capture Nha Trang and Cam Ranh and follow Highway 1 southwards.

The decision was despatched to the Central Highlands Command on March 30.

This completely fitted in with the thinking of Van Tien Dung and the Central Highlands Command.

In effect, before receiving the relevant message from the Politburo, Van Tien Dung and the Central Highlands Command had already discussed the plan to use Division 10 and Regiment 25 to capture Nha Trang and Cam Ranh and later to move to the eastern part of South Vietnam by following Highway 11.

The General Staff sent a message to Division 10, urging it to use limited forces to infiltrate the enemy's defensive perimeter, to prevent the enemy from destroying the technical installations at the Cam Ranh port and from forcibly evacuating the population. At the same time, news came that the enemy's 2nd Army Corps Command and their 3rd Paratroop Brigade were fleeing in disorder overland in the direction of Saigon. They had stopped in Phan Rang for the night of April 1.

The General Staff radioed the 5th Military Zone Command instructing them to send a large force including the

25th Regiment on Highway 1 and Regiment 95B on Highway 7, to intercept the enemy fleeing in the direction of Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh. It also radioed the 6th Military Zone Command, instructing them to use forces stationed along Highway 1 to combine their actions with this division to check the enemy's retreat. The following day, we were further informed that the enemy was using 3,000 military trucks to transport their troops from Cam Ranh to Saigon. On the morning of April 2 the convoy had reached Binh Thuan province. They were doing this on the assumption that Highway 1 had been cut at Xuan Loc; the only way left for their retreat was to follow the coast road past Ham Tan and Ba Ria and from there to Vung Tau. The General Staff radioed the 6th and 7th Military Zone Commands to immediately send a detachment to Binh Tuy and Phuoc Tuy to block the enemy withdrawal, or to at least slow them down. This might include digging up the road and interception by small units. The two military zones were also informed that Division 10 from the Central Highlands was moving in to liberate Nha Trang and Cam Ranh and would coordinate action with the local army to pursue the enemy fleeing from Phan Rang and Phan Thiet to the south.

In his message to Le Duc Tho, who was on his way to South Vietnam, Vo Nguyen Giap added, " We see that both ways would do, whether they move directly to the eastern part of South Vietnam or to move south after capturing Cam Ranh, at least as far as time is concerned".

On April 3, the General Staff received a message from Le Duc Tho addressed to Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung. He suggested that we should reinforce the 10th Division with another from the 5th Military Zone and liberate Phan Rang and Phan Thiet and then move on to

liberate Ba Ria and O Cap. By this means we could take the enemy offguard from the east. The road would be longer but easier for mechanized units.

On April 4, Le Duan together with the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee decided to reinforce the eastern wing of the army with three more divisions, Divisions 3, 325 and 304 (in Danang) together with artillery, anti-aircraft units and tanks. The task of this detachment was to whittle down enemy numbers during the march, block the approach to the Long Tau River and move on to Saigon from the southeast.

To boost the command strength of the eastern detachment (comprising the 2nd Army Corps under the command of Nguyen Huu An, the 3rd Division and support units), Le Trong Tan, Le Quang Hoa and Nam Long arrived on April 5 in Danang. Le Trong Tan was entrusted with command of this detachment. At the same time, the Central Military Committee decided to found the provisional personnel board of this detachment with Le Quang Hoa as secretary. When arriving in eastern Nam Bo this detachment would come under the command and leadership of the Party Committee and Command of the Saigon front.

Division 10, after liberating Nha Trang and Cam Ranh with the support of the army and population of the 6th Military Zone, went from Bac Ai to Tan My (Highway 11) then to Tuyen Duc from where it took Highway 20 to the regroupment zone of the 3rd Army Corps to the northwest of Saigon. Thousands of people in Bac Ai district worked day and night to repair the section of road from Ba Ngoi to Tan My to facilitate the army's advance.

By now intelligence reports were saying that the enemy had moved the front command of the 3rd Army Corps to

Xuan Loc and sent the 2nd Paratroop Brigade to Phan Rang to strengthen the town's defences as part of implementing the in-depth defensive strategy. We also learnt that Le Trong Tan and Le Quang Hoa on the morning of April 10 had left Quy Nhon for Nha Trang, and that Division 325 had left Danang on April 9 to be followed by Division 304.

On April 13 Le Trong Tan reported that Army Corps 2 had encountered no major difficulties in the area of logistics. At Cam Ranh it had received more than 2,000 tonnes of rice, 245 tons of gasoline and 1,000 tonnes of fuel oil. The issue now was how to take these materials more quickly to the Saigon battlefield. The Standing Office of the Central Military Committee decided that after liberating Phan Rang, the 2nd Army Corps and Division 3 would capture the town of Ba Ria and the Vung Tau base, sever the highway from Bien Hoa to Vung Tau, and completely check enemy movement on the Long Tau River. If the enemy regrouped to defend Bien Hoa, then our army would cross the river and move directly to the east and southeast of Saigon.

On April 2 we received reports that the enemy might try to reinforce Phan Rang to block our advance. Division 968 was not used to taking on major defensive positions with strong fortifications. We cabled Le Trong Tan suggesting that we might bypass Phan Rang and leave only a small unit to intercept enemy reinforcements. Of course, the detour would pose a logistical problem and difficulties in the movement of mechanized units.

A few days later the General Staff received reports that a detachment of the army moving along the coast under the command of Le Trong Tan had, with the assistance of the local army, captured Thanh Son airport and the town of Phan Rang. On the night of April 7, the special forces together with the local army in Ninh Thuan had captured

Thap Cham then entered Phan Rang. They had fought off many enemy counter-attacks and completely liberated the town, paving the way for the advance of the army's eastern wing. Also on April 7, Regiment 812 from Tuyen Duc had moved to Binh Thua and on the following day captured the enemy military sector at the district town of Thien Giao so that the local army could destroy the remaining enemy positions. Regiment 812 stayed at Phu Long, the gateway to the town of Phan Thiet, for five days in spite of fierce enemy air attacks. They also repelled many enemy counter-attacks and joined the 2nd Army Corps in liberating Phan Thiet.

Thus, following the liberation of the provinces of Lam Dong (March 30), Tuyen Duc (April 3), Binh Thuan (April 19), and Binh Tuy (April 23), almost the whole of the 6th Military Zone had been liberated (comprising the southern part of central Vietnam). On the map a very favourable situation had been created for our army before the curtain went up on the Saigon battle. A whole vast region had been liberated linking the South with the great rear base in the North.

In the flurry of reports on military victories reaching the headquarters of General Staff during those April days we paid great attention to an event on April 8 when Nguyen Thanh Trung, a pilot from the Saigon air force, staged a bombing run on the Saigon regime's Independence Palace, then landed at Phuoc Long airport which had by then been liberated by our army. Then there were reports that the naval units of our army in collaboration with the armed forces of the 5th Zone had begun liberating the islands of the Truong Sa (Spratley) Archipelago starting with Song Tu Tay Island.

Northeast of Saigon, the 4th Army Corps launched the battle of Xuan Loc on the night of April 9. There we encountered serious difficulties because the enemy had sent

in strong reinforcements while our army had not been well prepared. From April 12, we withdrew to the outer perimeter to encircle the enemy and intercept their reinforcements. We inflicted damage on their Division 18 and paratroop brigade, captured Dau Giay and controlled the junction of Highways 1 and 20, threatening the enemy's line of defence at Bien Hoa and Ho Nai.

On the night of April 20 the enemy abandoned Xuan Loc. Thus, the enemy's eastern line of defence had been cut. The General Staff also paid attention to the political struggle in Saigon and the Mekong River delta. At the daily briefings we constantly reminded the Operations and Militia Departments to make regular reports on uprisings by the population in various areas, especially after the liberation of Danang.

On April 17, the General Staff sent a message to the staff office of the southern front on the preparations undertaken by political forces in and around Saigon and in the surrounding provinces.

We learnt that on April 12, the Standing Committee of the Saigon party organization had issued a resolution on preparations for the political and armed struggle in Saigon to join the main army when the battle began. About 700 cadres inside the city and 1,000 others on the outskirts were sent for short courses on how to launch the mass uprisings. Nearly 40 organizations under a variety of denominations were quickly converted into political bases for us.

We had also set up 233 secret self-defence groups in the city and more than 3,000 guerrilla groups on the fringes. In the Mekong River delta, after Resolution 15 (dated March 29, 1975) of the Central Committee was issued instructing all localities in the South to stand ready to liberate themselves once the occasion presented itself, the localities in the 9th

Military Zone recruited thousands of cadres to boost the local provincial and district armed forces. The strength of the local armed forces increased from 15 to 24 battalions and was reinforced by another 60 companies. Militia and guerrilla forces across the whole region increased from a strength of 32,900 men and women (in May 1975) to 54,900 in April. In the 8th Military Zone, seven more battalions, 36 companies and 150 platoons of the local army were formed. In Ben Tre province in particular, the number of battalions increased from three to five, each district having one or two companies and each village one or two guerrilla platoons. It was expected that no less than 10,000 people could be organized into combat units when the order for the uprising was issued, to say nothing of the thousands of families of Saigon army personnel which had been won over to the revolution. In My Tho province, nearly 1,000 young men were recruited, which made it possible to form three new battalions and 28 companies in addition to the enlistment of 1,500 guerrillas in villages and 100 secret guerrillas in the town. Around 40,000 people were mobilized to transport armaments and 4,000 others to set up barricades on the Cho Gao Canal. The same efforts were seen in Long An, Kien Tuong and Sa Dec provinces.

In about mid-April when the General Staff made a general report on the deployment of political and armed forces in and around Saigon and the Mekong River delta, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee noted with joy that the battle on the political front might develop even better than had been anticipated after the uprising in Danang.

At the same time, orders were given to transport war supplies to the South "more expeditiously", as had been decided by the Politburo meeting in late March.

The question of increasing supplies to the Saigon front was put very early, even as the battle for the liberation of Hue and Danang was raging. The underlying concern of the Politburo was to ensure that we did not let the strategic opportunity slip away for whatever reason

A delegation from the General Staff and Logistics Department, headed by Phung The Tai, deputy Chief of Staff, was sent to the strategic supply route along the Truong Son Range to see to the satisfactory implementation of the supply programme. All of us closely monitored the movement of the 1st Army Corps departing from the southern part of the Red River delta, of the B3 units departing from many places in the Central Highlands, of Division 320B departing from Tri-Thien, Division 3 departing from Binh Dinh, Divisions 325 and 304 departing from Danang, and others. We were particularly concerned with the transportation of artillery ammunition especially shells for tank units. "Lightning, boldness, surprise and certain victory" was the watchword for the whole battlefield

On the routes east and west of the Truong Son Range all units received orders to move as fast as possible. The 1st Army Corps commanded by Nguyen Hoa and Hoang Minh Thi received orders at the end of March to take two divisions and technical units to the Saigon battlefield. Only Division 308 was ordered to stay to defend the North. The army corps received orders to move at lightning speed so that its first units might reach Dong Xoai around April 10.

As for the detachment moving along the coastline under the command of Le Trong Tan, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee sent successive messages to ask when it might reach Ba Ria. The task of this wing was to close in on the enemy's Bien Hoa-Ho Nai defence perimeter,

cut Highway 15 and the Long Tau River, and later join other forces in liberating Xuan Loc, thus encircling Saigon from the east and southeast. Meanwhile, Army 559 under the command of Dong Si Nguyen, who had by now moved his headquarters to Quy Nhon, and the 5th Zone Command, had also received orders to do everything in their power to transport war materiel and fuel so that the army in the east could reach the Saigon area on schedule.

April was the month for the departure of our army units from different places in the direction of Saigon. Our main task then was to closely follow their movements. Our supply routes on either side of the Truong Son Range had now been extended. We also had Highway 14 and Highway 1 at our disposal after the liberation of the coastal and Central Highlands provinces. But one great worry lay in the fact that we needed more trucks, even though the Defence Ministry had been given *carte blanche* to use, mobilize and requisition every means of transport including cars and taxis in the newly liberated zones.

At the daily briefings, the usual questions asked by members of the General Staff were, "Why is Unit A so late?" "Has Unit B arrived at X? How long has Unit C been in Y?" etc.

But among the hundreds of thousands of combatants moving post-haste to the South, some had been ordered to stop midway. Their task was to join the local administrations to consolidate the newly liberated areas. Some were assigned to coastal areas of central Vietnam, others to remote areas of the Central Highlands.

The landscapes and the lifestyles might differ but everywhere the army and the people were motivated by the same determination. But it was not always easy to adapt to local customs and habits. Newly arrived combatants made

painstaking efforts to learn the local dialects in order to join the local cadres in bringing the situation in these areas quickly back to normal—building schools and dispensaries, repairing roads, reclaiming fallow lands, consolidating mass organizations – all this had to be done with great expediency in order to quickly stabilize the situation and contribute to the battle which was developing at the forefront.

With the wholehearted support of the people, the "army of Bac (Uncle) Ho" buckled down to work, first to track down the remnants of the FULRO reactionary force. (FULRO was the acronym for Forces Unies pour la Libération des Races Opprimées, founded by the French but later used by the Americans to oppose the fight for liberation led by the Communist Party.)

The fight against FULRO was completely different from the face-to-face encounter with the Americans and their Saigon agents. It required not only strength but also – and mostly – intelligence and wisdom. Our combatants knew that this would not be an easy job of short duration. Combining mobilization with persuasion they conducted an often silent battle to assure security in newly liberated areas at a time when the liberation war was entering its decisive phase.

The supply of ammunition, especially large shells, to the different fronts remained a particular concern for the General Staff. On March 22, from the eastern part of South Vietnam, Van Tien Dung sent a message saying that the first boxes of artillery shells transported by Army 559 had begun to arrive in the South. But the number of tank shells remained desperately short while the supply of shells for other units was now reasonably adequate. He asked for an urgent airlift to Buon Ma Thuot airport of about 10,000 100 mm tank shells. The logistics service would then transport them to B2.

In his second message sent on the following day Van Tien Dung stated that the urgent transportation of artillery shells was under way to the various fronts so that the first barrage of the campaign could be fired on schedule

On April 19 the General Staff radioed the front to announce that 240 vehicles from Army 559 transporting 13,000 130 mm calibre artillery shells to the South had departed on April 17 together with 440 others carrying spare parts for tanks and 150 other vehicles from the General Logistics Department. Mortar shells had been collected from all depots in the North and were also making for the South.

In our message of reply to Van Tien Dung we asked him to clarify priorities in his request for shells because there was a critical shortage of means of transport. The absence of a priority order in the transportation of shells would seriously affect operational strategy.

On the following day we radioed Van Tien Dung saying he could set his mind at rest because 8,300 tanks shells were already on the way to the South, 2,300 of which would reach Dong Xoai on April 26, the remainder on April 28. At the same time, 2,944 shells would arrive by sea in Quy Nhon and Nha Trang on April 23 and 24. Twenty thousand more shells were expected to arrive in Nha Trang on May 1.

Although we saw that air transport was no quicker than overland due to restrictions on the weight of cargoes, we still sent several aircraft to carry some of the tank shells to Buon Ma Thuot when they reported that a convoy from the front's logistical department had been sent to the airport.

On the eastern front, however, Le Trong Tan reported that they still needed a lot of 130 mm, 100 mm and 85 mm shells, estimated at 4,000 of each type. We radioed to him that almost as many shells had been brought to Quy Nhon

and Nha Trang on April 24 and Dong Si Nguyen had received orders to transfer it immediately to the eastern front.

On this front Thanh Tuy Ha was a major ammunition depot for the enemy. It contained a large number of 105 mm and 155 mm shells. Our special forces and artillery had received orders to destroy only some warehouses and to spare certain others so that our men could use them in the incoming battles. This order had been transmitted to Le Trong Tan before he decided the artillery emplacements at Nhon Trach targeted on the Tan Son Nhut airfield.

Supervision of transportation of war supplies to the front became ever more urgent at the end of April. Supplies were ferried in the direction of Saigon according to the following order of priority: shells of larger calibre took precedence over smaller ones and lubricants before fuel of all types.

By now more than 15,000 tonnes of armaments had been shipped from the Central Highlands front. All available means of transport were mobilized to ferry the ammunition in Cam Lo and Thua Thien provinces to the south. Likewise, all highways including National Highway 1, Highway 19 and Highways 14 as well as the sea route were used for the transportation of war supplies from Quy Nhon and Nha Trang.

Lost in this endless stream of tens of thousands of army trucks bound for Saigon were two special vans carrying military maps departing Hanoi on April 10. This was reminiscent of the days of the Dien Bien Phu campaign in 1953 and 1954 when we also sent post-haste to the front a van carrying military maps. To tell the truth, there was no definite timetable for these two vans. We only told the men escorting the vans that they should radio us whenever they reached a place planned in the itinerary. But we insisted that the vans had to get to Dong Xoai no later than April 20.

Another important question was what should be the tactics for the battle to liberate Saigon.

On April 12, after being boosted in number by several new cadres, the Central Organizing Group held a meeting to discuss this question. Nguyen Van Duyen, deputy commander of the B2 battlefront, and Tran Hai Phung, former commander of the Saigon front, who were on vacation for health reasons in Hanoi, made very valuable suggestions on the battle plan.

By now the Xuan Loc battle was raging. The task of the Central Organising Group was to determine the right battle plans for two eventualities: either the Saigon battle was a swift victory or it would drag on until the rainy season.

On April 13, the team heard a report on the enemy situation in Saigon and on its fringes made by Tran Hai Phung. Having lived in Saigon for quite a long time he knew the situation there very well. The report enabled us to understand quite well the disposition of enemy forces inside Saigon as well as the specific locations of each of the major public buildings listed as targets for occupation by our troops in the coming battle.

The Central Organizing Group focused its discussions on the following questions:

- How to quickly encircle the enemy in Saigon both strategically and tactically;
- How to destroy the enemy's forces right on the outer perimeter to prevent them from regrouping to the inner city;
- How to wage the key battle and destroy the enemy's mobile forces in the most economical manner;
- How to block enemy reinforcements along the Long Tau River and Cho Gao Canal and neutralize their forces at Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut airports; and

- How to use enemy planes to strike at their inland positions and block their retreat to the sea and offshore islands.

On April 16, after hearing Cao Van Khanh report on the contingency plans, the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee suggested some more questions for study:

- What should be our action in the event of a quick disintegration of the enemy? Would the final battle in Saigon follow the same pattern as the battle in the Central Highlands?

- How would the enemy react when they discovered our forces around Saigon, especially in the direction of the sea? What would be the reaction of the enemy air force in case their Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut airbases came under heavy pressure?

- What would our plan be if the United States panicked and ditched Nguyen Van Thieu?

- How should we break the enemy's outer defence perimeter, close in on Saigon and force the rapid disintegration of the enemy?

- What was the contingency plan if the battle dragged on until the rainy season?

In the meantime, through Gerald Ford's statement we now knew that the US would abandon South Vietnam. We also received an intelligence report that Thieu had deployed all his reserve forces. The enemy air force still had three divisions but their action would be greatly limited if we could increase our artillery barrages on the Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut airbases.

On April 17 we held another meeting, which was also the last of the Central Organizing Group. A large military map hung on the wall showing the enemy disposition in each battlezone. It showed the enemy was strongest in the east and the northwest but was vulnerable in the west and southwest. While they were quite strong on the outer perimeter

the enemy was relatively weak inside the city. They were also exposed in the 4th Military Sector since most of the troops had been sent to defend Can Tho and other major towns on Highway 4. In the countryside only the "civil guard" were left. This offered a rare opportunity for the rural masses to rise up and liberate their hamlets through a combination of political and military force.

We came to the following conclusions which we reported to the Standing Office of the Central Military Committee:

1. On enemy disposition: the enemy defence was characterized by a strong outer perimeter and a weak and even hollow interior. They had pushed all their main forces to the outer perimeter to cope with our main force. But we had formed a close ring around their outer perimeter while in Saigon most enemy positions had come within range of our large artillery. Moreover, our underground force was ready to act at any time. If the enemy fell apart quickly on the outer perimeter the population inside Saigon would rise up and this would plunge the enemy into disarray as had happened in Danang. The US would abandon Thieu and we could capture Saigon without much difficulty.

2. On the direction of our attack: We would choose the northeast as the main direction while the north (Binh Duong) and the west were also very important. We would make surprise inroads in the southeast while not neglecting the southern direction.

3. On the method of fighting: We would combine military offensive with popular uprising. First of all, we had to tighten our encirclement, break up the enemy's disposition and cause the disintegration of the enemy's outer defensive groupings and prevent them from regrouping inside the city.

Otherwise, the fight inside the city and on its fringes might drag on and cost us dear.

4. Some specific issues had to be resolved before the main battle began:

- Ensuring that all detachments arrived at their regroupment places on time (between April 20 and April 23), especially to the north, northwest and southwest of Saigon.

- The eastern army after capturing Ba Ria would quickly move to Vung Tau to capture Long Thanh, then Nhon Trach and from there bombard Tan Son Nhut airport.

- The 4th Army Corps must stand ready to intercept the enemy withdrawing from Xuan Loc, to whittle down and disband the 18th Division of the Saigon infantry.

- Army 232 would continue to occupy strategic points on Highway 4 according to plan.

- All detachments should quickly move into position and bombard Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut airbases and the headquarters of the enemy's General Staff. The army from the 9th Military Zone must prevent the enemy from using Can Tho airfield to support Saigon.

- Making careful preparations to tighten our encirclement to prevent the enemy from regrouping inside the city. On the inner perimeter (Cu Chi, Trang Bang, Ben Cat, Lai Thieu) preparations should be made so that when fighting broke out the masses should rise up to seize power and move out to the north and northwest, but there should not be a premature uprising.

- While the main force attacked the enemy, the special forces would capture all the bridges and defend them, especially Cau Moi, Cau Ghenh, the bridge on the motorway leading to

Dong Nai, Cau Rach Chiec, the bridge on the Saigon motorway, Binh Phuoc, Binh Loi, and Binh Trieu to the northeast and north, Bong and Xang to the north and northwest.

- Mechanized infantry units should make the most of the enemy's vulnerability to quickly move into the city. Underground forces should operate in small groups behind enemy lines in combination with agitation among the families of enemy soldiers.

5. In case the fighting dragged on until the rainy season, we should continue our attack. But the following must be ensured:

- Boosting political and ideological work to maintain the army's determination to fight on.

- Preparing for replacements in a way suitable to the geographical conditions of Saigon and the western part of South Vietnam in general.

- Defending the strategic as well as tactical campaign roads, preventing enemy sabotage and overcoming difficulties caused by the rainy season.

- Strengthening our forces in order to intensify our attacks in the Mekong River delta and to regularly combine with the fight in Saigon.

- Studying specific tactics for use during the rainy season and the necessary forces to be used in each main battlezone.

By April 18 we had completed a comprehensive report and submitted it to the Commander-in-Chief. After Vo Nguyen Giap agreed to the plan I made it clear to the commanders of the southern front that this should not be seen as an unalterable plan, but that they had to come to terms with battlefield realities.

We also asked them to be very alert to the reaction of the Saigon regime and US intentions. Then we learned that

enemy forces at Xuan Loc were being regrouped to cope with our attacks, concentrating mostly on the section of Highway 4 between Can Tho and Saigon. It could be safely assumed that if the enemy detected the movements of our 2nd Army Corps from Ba Ria and Vung Tau they would strengthen their forces in this direction to cover their withdrawal. This was why we urged the 2nd Army Corps to quicken their pace.

Just two barrages by our 130 mm artillery had sufficed to plunge the enemy at the Bien Hoa airfield into disarray. It became clear that if we could hold the enemy in check at the airports of Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut and Can Tho, they would face real danger of a rout and in that case, the morale of their troops would plummet.

Intelligence reports said that the United States and other Western embassies were preparing to pull out of Saigon between April 18 and 20. We envisioned that if this happened, Saigon would descend into complete chaos. However, we had to guard against the possibility that Ford and Kissinger would use this contingency as a pretext to ask Congress for emergency aid to the Thieu government using the pretext of humanitarian concern.

In the meantime, the position of the Saigon regime became more critical with each passing day. Their total mobile forces inside the city consisted of two depleted paratroop brigades. They had to transfer many aircraft from Bien Hoa to Tan Son Nhut and Can Tho airports. The Saigon military commanders showed utter disorder in their troop placement. Then came the report that from April 15 the Americans in Cambodia would evacuate Phnom Penh after the Ford administration had decided to ditch Lon Nol.

This allowed us to think of possible political upheaval right within Saigon. It also encouraged our side to make more urgent preparations to deal the decisive blow when the opportunity presented itself.

On April 20, it was confirmed that the Americans had begun to evacuate from Saigon. That same night the Saigon government fled from Xuan Loc. On the following day, Thieu resigned. The population of Bien Hoa began to evacuate from the town.

We sent many more messages urging our men to quicken their pace, especially the eastern army which was expected to capture Ba Ria-Vung Tau, cut off the enemy's retreat and block enemy movements on the Long Tau River and prepare to take on Bien Hoa as had been planned.

After a meeting of the Politburo on the morning of April 22, a message signed by Le Duan was sent post-haste to the commander in the South. After mentioning the enemy withdrawal from Xuan Loc and Thieu's resignation, the message said: "The above-mentioned situation is causing confusion among enemy ranks. A popular uprising is in the offing. The US and its puppets are attempting to delay our offensive against Saigon by forming a new government and proposing to us (through the Lao government) a ceasefire in the hope of reaching some form of political compromise and staving off complete failure. The political and military opportunity for launching a general offensive in Saigon is ripe. We need to make the most of every day and every minute to launch concerted attacks on the enemy in all directions and without delay. Acting promptly will be the surest guarantee for winning complete and total victory".

The message stressed: "Take care to combine the military offensive with a popular uprising and coordinate action among our different prongs of attack".

Also on April 22, the Central Military Committee sent to the field commanders a message detailing the decisions reached between the Standing Office of the Military Committee and the Politburo. The message also detailed the role of the special task force and commando force in Saigon in capturing the most vital buildings of the enemy according to plan. In particular, in the southwest of Saigon and on Highway 4, the message pointed to the following tasks:

- Units assigned the task of attacking the city must stand ready to act at any time.

- Detachments on Highway 4 must choose a section of the highway between Tan An and Cai Lay over which to destroy a number of enemy posts in order to split their forces and prevent them from giving mutual assistance.

At the same time we must stand ready to intercept the enemy during their withdrawal from Saigon to Can Tho.

The testimony of Saigon's Lieutenant-General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, captured on April 16 in Phan Rang, deserved particular attention. We radioed the gist of this testimony, especially those passages bearing on our plan of action, to the southern commanders and also sent them a recorded tape.

Nguyen Vinh Nghi knew very little about our forces except about the army in B2 (the Mekong River delta). According to him, the Saigon General Staff thought that we might attack Saigon from two directions: from the north and the east along National Highway I and from the northwest along Highway 13.

The enemy's defence line around Saigon, called in-depth defence, was arranged in the form of an arc passing

through Go Dau Ha, Lai Khe, Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc. Each of these positions was defended by one division.

In the event of a general attack on Saigon the enemy would withdraw three divisions from the 4th Tactical Zone to Can Tho, one to defend the airport within a radius of 12 km, another to defend Highway 4 from Vinh Long to Cai Lay, and the third from Cai Lay to Tan An. In the enemy's judgment only if this highway was defended could Saigon be defended and vice-versa.

According to Nguyen Vinh Nghi, the enemy never had the intention of abandoning Saigon and retreating to the 4th Tactical Zone, since this area was logistically unprepared.

Also according to Nghi's testimony, the main force of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime inside Saigon consisted of the police and "civil guard". There was no defence system inside the city except for some at strategic points. In Nghi's opinion, we should not launch a direct attack on Saigon; instead we needed only to capture the airports and neutralize the enemy's defence forces on the outer perimeter – their whole defence system in the city would quickly disintegrate. If we ever decided to attack Saigon, we should only capture the Tan Son Nhut airfield, the headquarters of the General Staff and defeat the paratroopers at Hoang Hoa Tham camp, he said. Nguyen Vinh Nghi also believed the most effective attack would be from the direction of Go Dau Ha and Trang Bang. He also said that the Saigon regime might destroy the key bridges to the east of Saigon to delay our advance.

This captured Saigon general further let it be known that the most important storage points were Nha Be and Cat Lai, the latter being the Saigon army's biggest ammunition dump. The Long Binh depot, in spite of its impressive size, was only an intermediate supply station of little strategic significance.

The enemy was relying mainly on their air force since their ground troops were thinly dispersed and their reserve forces had been depleted. The Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut and Can Tho airfields thus played a crucial role in the defence of Saigon, particularly the one at Bien Hoa. This was the place where F5 and A37 attack planes were repaired because Tan Son Nhut and Can Tho airfields did not have the necessary equipment. Most of the F5 and A37s were still kept in underground hangars at Bien Hoa although a number had been moved to other places.

Although Nguyen Vinh Nghi did not try to misguide us, because he did not understand revolutionary military tactics his suggestions could not be incorporated into our strategic plan.

One day in late April, as the General Staff office was holding a meeting to discuss preparations for the April 26 session of the Politburo, a message dated April 25 arrived from Le Duc Tho addressed to Le Duan. The ten-page message summed up the situation in B2 over the past few weeks since the start of the Xuan Loc battle.

Le Duc Tho completely shared the views of the Politburo as to the necessity of launching a general offensive sooner rather than later because, he said, any delay would make the situation more complicated, especially from the military aspect, given the forthcoming onset of the rainy season. However, he added, some remaining problems had to be resolved before we could launch the decisive attack.

First of all, even though all the detachments had arrived at their places of regroupment, they all needed time to study the battleground, especially the enemy disposition in Saigon.

Then there was the supply question. Because of the long route from North to South and the sharp increase in the number of units involved in the upcoming campaign, there was a critical shortage of ammunition, especially large shells.

Our intelligence reports said that the enemy was still in the dark about tactics; would we continue our encirclement and war of attrition on their outer defensive perimeter or launch a frontal assault?

The enemy's defensive strategy consisted of keeping us as far as possible from Saigon, especially in a north and northwesterly direction. We knew of their plan to destroy all the major bridges once they judged their defence to be untenable. That would cause more than a few problems for the movements of our mechanized units. So we also had contingency plans if the worst happened and our units could cross the river.

In his message Le Duc Tho also told of the plan to coordinate military attacks with popular uprisings. Vo Van Kiet had gone to the Mekong River delta to make a final check on the implementation of this strategy. The commanders of the front agreed with the Politburo's prediction that once the enemy were defeated in Saigon their forces in the Mekong delta and other localities would fall apart quickly and the population would not encounter any serious resistance in launching the general uprising.

Le Duc Tho and the other commanders in the South anticipated that if they could hold on to Saigon the enemy would regroup to the north and northwest.

Le Duc Tho's message also let it be known why the southern army could not launch major attacks on the enemy in Xuan Loc on Highway 4 and the southwestern fringe of Saigon even before the arrival of the main force from the North. That, he said, was due to our inexperience in organizing large-scale attacks and also because of major difficulties in transporting supplies. The message stressed:

"Don't worry. We are making the most of the time to overcome some remaining problems and will start the operation as planned".

After the message was read, the Politburo at its meeting on April 26 anticipated that the United States might replace Nguyen Van Thieu with Duong Van Minh. So it decided that the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam should issue a statement in order to forestall such a political ploy. In its message of reply the Politburo stressed: "The Politburo emphasizes that we need to act very promptly and boldly..."

Within a very short period of time, this spirit had permeated all activities of the army and people throughout the country. Everything was directed at the key battlefield in Saigon under the watchword "Lightning speed".

On the battlefield our army had routed another important section of the enemy's forces at Xuan Loc and Long Khanh, drawing the 3rd Saigon Army Corps to the east, thus making the enemy more vulnerable to the north and northwest of Saigon. To the southwest we had moved close to Highway 4 and firmly taken up position in Long An province, posing a deadly threat to the enemy in Saigon from the south. The local armies in the Mekong delta, meanwhile, were effectively pinning down enemy forces and preventing them from going to the rescue of Saigon.

Our mobile strategic forces, comprising nearly 10 infantry divisions and mechanized units, had reached their regroupment places after a lightning speed march from northern and central Vietnam.

The strategic logistical forces under the command of Dinh Duc Thien and Bui Phung had formed into five detachments to serve on five different battlefronts. The transport routes accessible to tanks and big artillery had by now been lengthened to 1,800 kilometres. All means of transport had been mobilized together with more than 63,000 front supply

workers. By the appointed time (April 25, 1975) all material and technical preparations for the final battle had been completed. All told, 100,000 tonnes of military supplies had been brought from the North. This, together with more than 60,000 tonnes of on-the-spot stockpiles, was more than enough for even a prolonged battle until after the onset of the rainy season.

CHAPTER VII

THE FINAL ASSAULT

After a briefing on the morning of April 27, we decided to hold an expanded meeting of the General Staff to which the representatives of all departments were invited. Probably not one person there remembered that it was a Sunday after it was announced that our army detachment from the east of Saigon had fired the curtain-raising artillery rounds.

Opening the meeting, Cao Van Khanh formally announced that on April 13 the campaign command, complying with the wishes of all officers and men on the battlefield, had sent a message to the Politburo proposing that the battle for the liberation of Saigon be named the "Ho Chi Minh campaign". The following day Le Duan, First Secretary of the Party, replied that the Politburo had agreed. The meeting burst into rousing applause.

The Intelligence Department gave us the latest reports on the enemy situation.

It was now beyond doubt that the United States had finally reconciled themselves to defeat and decided to quit. Whereas in the previous week both President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had still been urging Congress to grant additional emergency aid to Nguyen Van Thieu, now no-one was mentioning the question again in the face of the imminent total collapse of the Saigon regime. On April 18 Ford ordered all Americans to leave South Vietnam. The following day Kissinger declared to the press:

"How the political situation in South Vietnam develops now completely depends on the South Vietnamese themselves. The United States is ready to accept any solution adopted by them". On the same day, a letter to Nguyen Van Thieu US ambassador Martin said, "No alternative now exists other than prolonging the existence of Saigon for one or two more weeks. The town may fall into the hands of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong within a few weeks".

At about the same time as Nguyen Van Thieu was ordering the evacuation of Xuan Loc, the US began the evacuation of American troops from South Vietnam. Three US ships arrived off the South Vietnamese coast for this purpose.

With the tacit agreement of the United States, the military in South Vietnam increased their pressure, demanding Thieu's resignation and the hand-over of power to Tran Xuan Huong. But only two days later, the new Saigon government handed in its resignation when Ford's statement reached Saigon. Ford declared: "The war in South Vietnam has ended as far as the United States is concerned. We can no longer help the South Vietnamese (the Saigon regime). They have to face any fate that awaits them".

From April 24 most Western embassies in Saigon closed their doors. International airlines at Tan Son Nhut airport stopped operating. On April 26 newly-installed Prime Minister Tran Van Huong asked the "national assembly" to empower Duong Van Minh to "negotiate with the National Liberation Front". On the same day Thieu fled abroad. Thus began a selective evacuation of Americans and their Vietnamese collaborators.

There were many indications that France wanted to arrange a ceasefire and cessation of the war. Paris sent an

emisary to South Vietnam to contact a representative of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

After listening to intelligence reports and basing ourselves on basic assessments by the Politburo, we came to the following conclusions :

1. Following the liberation of Phnom Penh on April 17, it was clear that the United States was abandoning Nguyen Van Thieu.

2. The political crisis in Saigon had reached a climax as had been anticipated by the Politburo.

3. It was necessary to follow closely the attitude of France and especially that of China while the military campaign to liberate Saigon was in progress. Using a military map on the wall, Cao Van Khanh explained the balance of forces on the Saigon battlefield before the campaign started in earnest.

After withdrawing from Xuan Loc the enemy had redeployed their forces along three defensive perimeters around Saigon.

The outer perimeter was defended by five divisions positioned from Long An to Tay Ninh southwards and eastwards to Bien Hoa and Long Binh. The fringes of Saigon itself were defended by two brigades and three groups of commandos positioned in four sectors: the northern sector from Hoc Mon and Cau Bong to Tan Son Nhut airfield, the western sector from Vinh Loc-Chau Hiep, Ba Hom and Binh Chanh southwards, the eastern sector from Go Vap to the 9th district, and the southern sector from Nha Be westwards.

The inner city was divided into five zones defended mainly by the police and civil guard.

From this it could be seen that the enemy's defence was strong on the outer perimeter and weaker on the inner. The

paratroops and commandos which were the Saigon army's two trump cards had been trounced. On the whole, the enemy's military forces were in a state of disintegration and their morale was very low. Nevertheless, on the Saigon-Gia Dinh front, the enemy still retained two fairly strong units, i.e. the 2nd and 4th Army Corps. These units might be able to hold on until after the onset of the rainy season. For our part, in the northwest which was the main thrust of our army, from April 25 the 3rd Army Corps had moved its divisions and heavy equipment to the west of the Saigon River. To the west, the 1st Army Corps had moved to the south of Song Be. To the east, from noon on April 26 the 2nd Army Corps had taken up position. As for the 4th Army Corps, after liberating Xuan Loc it had been deployed to the south and north of National Highway 1. To the west and southwest, Army Group 232, despite major difficulties, had also moved to its place of regroupment after being reinforced by the 9th Division and the 16th Independent Regiment of the southern front together with part of the 6th Division from the 7th Military Zone.

In the matter of troop positioning, the main force on the southern front and from the 8th Military Zone had closed in on Highway 4 and suburban districts. To the north and northwest our army had closed in on Tan Uyen, Go Gau and Cu Chi. To the east we had moved close to Trang Bom, Ho Nai and the Nuoc Trong base.

In the meantime, the special task force, commandos and armed units from Saigon itself had moved to their appointed places around key targets. These included six special task force groups (equivalent to six regiments in size) which had for several years operated behind enemy lines, four battalions and many special task force groups which had been operating in suburban villages, and 60 groups from inside the

city. In addition, there were about 300 armed individuals and large segments of the population who had been organized and put under the command of the special task force. Our forces also included many companies and battalions of the underground Saigon army, together with two regiments from Gia Dinh positioned to the west and northwest of the city. There were also units from eastern Nam Bo provinces who were encircling the enemy inside Saigon and were ready at any time to coordinate action with the main force to defeat the enemy.

Hundred of Party cadres, including many armed ones, had infiltrated into the city to join with local officials in organizing the masses for an eventual uprising as soon as the army began its large-scale assault on Saigon. In general, the balance of forces before the Saigon battle was one to three in our favour.

After careful consideration, the front command decided to select five crucial targets our army had to capture quickly at any cost; first, Tan Son Nhut airfield which was the Saigon regime's most vital liaison and communications centre within South Vietnam as well as with the outside. The other four targets were the headquarters of the Saigon army General Staff, the Presidential Palace, the Saigon Special Military Sector and the General Police Headquarters. If they lost these five main offices, the Saigon army and administration would be like a snake whose head had been chopped off and the population in Saigon would be able to rise up to coordinate action with the Liberation Army.

On battlefield tactics, the front command decided the following : first, we should tighten our encirclement to completely isolate the enemy inside Saigon and its vicinity by land, air and water. Then, with an appropriate force, we would take on the enemy's defensive positions on the outer

perimeter while concentrating a large combined force to launch a direct assault on the city in order to capture the five set targets without delay. From these five headquarters our forces would quickly fan out to join the special task force, commandos and underground armed units together with politically enlightened forces inside the city to capture all the enemy's important military, political and economic facilities. We would pay special attention to capturing bridges, airports and enemy artillery emplacements and also to developing our political forces in the wake of our advance.

The front command anticipated that under combined military and political attack by our forces the enemy would have no time to destroy bridges and other important military and political installations inside the city. Neither would they be able to regroup their forces in order to defend strategic points including high-rise areas and densely populated residential quarters or to prolong their resistance inside the city. In this way, we could end the fighting quickly and minimise loss of life and property.

In the afternoon, the meeting heard a representative from the General Political Department of the Army present a plan for political work during the Ho Chi Minh campaign.

Political work assumed a very important role because this was the first time our army had undertaken such a major military campaign involving nearly half a million men, and the target was the city of Saigon, the nerve centre of the puppet regime. The ultimate aim of this work was to make the entire army and people realize that the goal of this campaign was to completely break the enemy's military and political machine, liberate the whole of South Vietnam and reunify the country.

The front command then issued an instruction on political work which was sent out to each unit, with the aim of

building a lasting determination to achieve the sacred aim of the movement for national liberation.

The instruction cautioned against subjectivism, complacency, under-estimation of the enemy, hesitancy, reliance on artillery or friendly units, and also all manifestations of sectarianism. The instruction also called for strict observance of combat discipline and all policies regarding the spoils of war and the treatment of prisoners of war.

Finally, the representative of the General Political Department read an appeal by the Party's Regional Military Committee for South Vietnam, penned at the end of the instructions:

"Let us plant the 'Determination to Fight and to Win' banner, handed to us by Bac Ho, on top of the glorious city bearing his name as a greeting on the 85th anniversary of his birth".

Together with the instruction on political work, the front's education and propaganda board distributed the "Seven Teachings of President Ho during the 1968 General Offensive and Uprising" and his recommendations to the army during the take-over of Hanoi and other cities in northern Vietnam in 1954 (these seven teachings are: determination must be firm; the plan must go into small details; inspection must be meticulous; coordination must be close; implementation must be rigorous; cadres must be exemplary; and secrets must be closely guarded).

Next came a report on the assuring of material and technical supplies for the front.

The representatives from the General Logistics and Technical Departments reported that thanks to the strengthening and extending of the main supply routes on the east and west of the Truong Son Range, the extending of the pipelines to the South and the improvement of all connecting

highways, within a short period of time 100,000 tonnes of military supplies had been sent from the North to the front.

In the South itself logistical work had been considerably strengthened both organisationally and materially. Three more supply corridors had been opened up from Long Khanh to Ba Ria in the east, from Ben Cau to Kien Tuong in the west and along Highway 4 in the north. Many more temporary stores had been set up on the way to Saigon and right inside the city, ready to serve the operations of the special task force and commandos.

In the Mekong River delta, eastern Nam Bo and even around Saigon, the entire population was mobilized to work for the front. The nearly 100,000 tonnes of war supplies accumulated on the spot were enough to meet more than half the needs of the front. Tens of thousands of supply workers, together with hundreds of boats and junks, were also brought into action.

To this source was added considerable booty captured on various battlefronts in the south, Central Highlands and coastal provinces of central Vietnam.

Concluding his report, the representative of the General Logistics Department said with joy:

"I should add that our great concern about the shortage of large shells has now ended. In the past month we have captured a large quantity of ammunition, more than enough for the final battle, to say nothing of the amount we will capture from the enemy after the battle begins and also the amount which is on the way here from the North".

The meeting also discussed cooperation between the General Staff and the General Political Department in leadership of the campaign.

By now Group A75 made up of commanding officers led by General Van Tien Dung had reached B2 from the Central Highlands. It had been reinforced by another team of cadres including commanding officers from the various armed services such as Doan Tue, artillery commander, Le Xuan Kien, deputy commander of armoured units and Nguyen Chi Diem, leader of the commando force.

One of the issues raised during our discussions with the commanders in the South was the use of fighter aircraft during the upcoming battle. In the meantime the navy had, together with the army from the 5th Military Zone, liberated a number of islands in the Truong Sa (Spratley) Archipelago. How should the air force be used?

Over the past few years our air force, though young and limited in size, had fulfilled with flying colours its task of defending the North against American air attacks. Now the situation had changed.

On April 7, Le Ngoc Hien, in a cable from the South, reported that at Nha Trang and Cam Ranh we had captured a number of fighter aircraft.

He proposed that the Ministry of Defence send a team of experts to study ways to use them. The following day, we received the news that Nguyen Thanh Trung, a Saigon air force pilot we had planted in enemy ranks, flying an F5E, had made a bombing run on Nguyen Van Thieu's palace then safely landed at Phuoc Long airfield in the now liberated zone.

We in the General Staff unanimously proposed to the Central Military Committee for the Army that we should use pilots from the Saigon army who had come over to us either as instructors or maintenance workers or even as fighter pilots during the forthcoming battle for Saigon.

We emphasised that we should take advantage of the enemy's disarray to carry out air attacks against some important targets in Saigon especially Tan Son Nhut airfield, using planes belonging to the enemy.

Le Duc Tho and Van Tien Dung held similar views. They assigned to Nguyen Thanh Trung the task of commanding a number of Saigon pilots who had crossed over to our ranks to attack enemy positions using A37 and F5E aircraft. We had made a good haul of F5E aircraft at Danang airbase which could be sent into battle right away.

The Air Defence and Air Force Command was instructed to send immediately a team of pilots and technicians to Danang. Within a few days eight fighter pilots were trained and four A37 aircraft were declared fit for use. On April 27, Le Van Tri, commander of the air defences and air force was sent to Thanh Son airfield to get a flight of A37s ready for action within a few days. Meanwhile at Danang we continue to train pilots for the A37s and F5Es.

On methods of attack, it was decided that we should use only small flights in the same formation as used by the Saigon air force. The first targets should be the headquarters of the Saigon General Staff and Tan Son Nhut airfield. Our planes would take off from Thanh Son and fly only 300 metres above the ground, then zoom upward at Xuan Loc before hitting their targets. After dropping their bombs they would make for the North to mislead the enemy before returning to Thanh Son.

We also took the precaution of alerting anti-aircraft units on the coast not to fire on planes flying southward from Phan Rang.

After the meeting I invited Nguyen Duy Phe, head of the Military Communications Department, to discuss further preparations in the matter of coded messages.

From March, the communications group had set up operations in the office of the Chief of Staff near the meeting room of the Central Military Committee of the Party. Van Tien Dung was in the South. On the wall of his room hung a big map of the world and another of Southeast Asia.

There were two women in the communications group, Dang Thi Muon and Vu Thi Trong. Since the curtain-raiser battle in the Central Highlands, nearly all the messages from the front had been marked with the words "to be decoded immediately". Some messages were as long as 15 or 20 pages.

It had become routine for Commander-in-Chief Vo Nguyen Giap to pace to and fro in the corridor of this headquarters for the great battle taking place in the South. Now and then he would walk in and using a biro, would add or delete a word in a message before it was sent.

One day I asked a young officer from the communications group:

"What message do you wish to decode in the days to come?"

The whole group replied almost in unison:

"That will be the message that our men have planted our flag on top of the Independence Palace in Saigon".

All the rooms in the military headquarters were lit up. I went to the Operations Room where Cao Van Khanh was reporting by telephone on the day's developments to the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. At 1700 hours on April 26 a detachment under the command of Le Trong Tan launched their attack on the Nuoc Trong base as well as the military subsectors of Long Thanh, Duc Thanh and the town of Ba Ria.

To the northwest of Saigon, artillery under the command of Vu Lang was pounding enemy artillery emplace-

ments while Division 316 had captured Phu My and eastern Trang Bang and some sections of Highway 22. In the southwest, troops under Le Duc Anh had moved close to Highway 10, ready to attack the enemy on Highway 4, cut off Saigon from the Mekong River delta and cross the Vam Co Dong River in order to move close to the fringes of Saigon. In the north, Division 312 of the 1st Army Corps was poised for an attack on the enemy at Binh Co and Binh My to back up the capture of Lai Khe and Ben Cat, also near Saigon. It was planned that on the morning of April 29 all detachments would simultaneously storm into Saigon. Cao Van Khanh sent a message from the secretary of the Central Military Committee (Vo Nguyen Giap) to the army east of Saigon with the following instructions: one, to make hourly and daily reports on battlefield developments; two, to make a preliminary assessment of the situation, to make a projection for an attack on inner Saigon in case the main force could cooperate with other armies and in case it had to singlehandedly enter Saigon first without waiting for the other armies (the message stressed that this would be done only if success was assured); and three, to quickly install 130 mm cannon at Nhon Trach to bombard Tan Son Nhut airfield.

The situation as of April 27 showed that the army to the east was encountering more favourable circumstances, while those to the north and northwest might encounter stiff resistance. The army to the southwest might also catch up with the others. The battles on Highway 4 were developing favourably. If the army to the southwest could move more quickly, it would create favourable conditions for the operations of the armies to the north and northwest.

At a briefing on the morning of April 28, Cao Van Khanh reported that the situation in the Mekong delta

remained unclear while around Saigon our troop deployment could be graphically demonstrated on the map.

In the east we had broken through the enemy's outer defensive perimeter and controlled Highway 22 and most of Highway 15, moved closer to Ba Ria and cut it off from Vung Tau, and liberated most parts of Phuoc Tuy and Bien Hoa provinces. But we had not been able to occupy the town of Bien Hoa and Nhon Trach as planned and accordingly had not been able to install long-range artillery in order to bombard Tan Son Nhut airfield and the Long Tau River.

To the north, Division 312 was in place, and part of Division 320B had crossed the river and taken up position west of Highway 16 ready for action. The local armed forces and popular masses had risen up to join the action with the main force of the regular army. In the northwest, Division 316, together with the local Tay Ninh army, had taken up position at Phu My and Trang Bang and cut Highway 22 in several places. The enemy on Highways 1 and 22 had been repeatedly intercepted by our men. In coordination with the 3rd Army Corps the local army and population of Trang Bang, Hieu Thien, Khiem Hanh and Phuoc Ninh were encircling and forcing the withdrawal of many posts and liberating most of the villages and hamlets in the Tay Ninh countryside. The armed forces on the fringes of Saigon had liberated a number of localities on Highway 7 (northern Cu Chi). The special task force was carefully guarding Binh Phuoc bridge over the Saigon River and had got ready to occupy the village north of Tan Son Nhut airport.

In the west and southwest, our troops were moving heavy artillery and tanks across the Vam Co Dong River. Two regiments from the 8th Military Zone to the south had arrived at Can Giuoc and already controlled Highway 5, ready to make a thrust into the 8th and Nha Be districts.

In the afternoon we learned from Western radio reports that at 1640 hrs, five A37 attack planes had bombed Tan Son Nhut airfield, destroying many aircraft on the ground including several US planes on stand-by to evacuate Americans from Saigon. The news plunged Saigon into turmoil.

This news was received by the General Staff at almost the same time as news of the resignation of Tran Van Huong from the presidency in favour of Duong Van Minh as the Politburo had anticipated. Duong Van Minh called on the Saigon army "to defend the remaining territory and in order to do so, everyone must firmly stand his ground".

That night the General Staff reported to the Politburo and Central Military Committee on the situation after the first two days of the offensive.

On the whole, our army had effectively implemented the strategy of encircling, isolating and attacking Saigon. Highway 15 from Saigon to Vung Tau had been cut as well as Highway 4 from Saigon to the Mekong River delta. In the east, despite last-ditch enemy resistance, the 8th Army Corps had occupied a number of strategic positions such as Trang Bom, Long Thanh, Duc Thanh, the town of Ba Ria and most of the Nuoc Trong base. The Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut airbases had been paralysed; Saigon was completely isolated by land, air and water. The local army and population on the fringes of Saigon had coordinated action with the main forces to liberate a large rural area around the enemy's military subsectors, district headquarters and other major bases around Saigon.

A major concern for the General Staff at this point in time was directing special task force units in capturing and defending the bridges leading into Saigon, especially from the east in order to ensure the movement of mechanized units.

First reports from the Mekong delta said that our forces had moved close to the towns of Can Tho and My Tho and already had Binh Thuy within artillery range.

Many top officers and officials from the Saigon regime had fled to the United States. The replacement of Tran Van Huong with Duong Van Minh showed that enemy ranks were in complete disarray. However, they still hoped for a compromise to achieve a ceasefire.

After hearing the report, Vo Nguyen Giap, on behalf of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, sent a message of congratulations to all cadres and men on the southern front, urging them to "courageously move forward and win total victory for the historic campaign bearing the name of the great Bac Ho". The message reminded them of the need to rout or cause the disintegration of the enemy's forces in the Mekong delta and to make the necessary arrangements for the redeployment of forces after complete liberation of the South. In the operations room, Cao Van Khanh, together with officers from the Combat Operations and Intelligence Departments, sat up almost around the clock to follow developments on the Saigon front. An aide stood by his side, marking on the military map each new advance by the Liberation Army.

Over Western radio we learned that many more military chiefs and high officials from the Saigon regime had fled abroad, including 60 "parliamentarians", Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien and newly-resigned Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can. Inside Saigon, evacuation was taking place in a situation of complete disorder. The Americans had begun to use helicopters in the evacuation from the tops of many high-rise buildings in the city centre, fanning the atmosphere of panic. On the afternoon of April 28 Duong Van Minh had a brief

meeting with the remaining generals of the Saigon army. More than half of those invited to the meeting advocated an immediate ceasefire. Duong Van Minh later sent a government representative to Tan Son Nhut and asked to meet our representative in order to 'negotiate a ceasefire'. Duong Van Minh had not lost all hope because, as he was quoted as saying, "Hanoi might be ready to negotiate since it does not have the necessary administrative apparatus to run the whole of the country, so it might accept some form of transitional regime".

That night, in the presence of Vo Nguyen Giap, we heard Le Huu Duc, head of the Combat Operations Department, sum up the situation after three days of fighting. By April 29, all detachments had fulfilled their missions although the speed of their advance varied from one army to another. Virtually all the enemy's forces on the outer perimeter had been put out of action. The most significant resistance was being encountered by the army in the east, causing some delay to the 4th Army Corps, but the 2nd Army Corps had reached the Saigon-Bien Hoa motorway, bypassing the Long Binh base. The local armies on the outskirts of Saigon had occupied the most vital bridges while intercepting enemy forces fleeing into Saigon.

For three days, and particularly on April 29, the enemy had offered only limited resistance. The reality was that their command structure had been paralysed. The puppet administration was fast collapsing. The campaign of evacuation was in full swing and nearing an end.

All our army detachments had received orders to thrust directly into Saigon and occupy the targets set.

As we were listening to the report, a messenger arrived with a message just to hand from Le Trong Tan. He reported

that two army corps had launched the attack into Saigon at 1600 hrs. He promised to send another message at 0400 hours on April 30.

Vo Nguyen Giap held a brief discussion with Le Duan and immediately sent a reply to Le Trong Tan and another to Van Tien Dung asking them to act expeditiously and decide for themselves the exact time for the general assault. The messages were sent out at 2215 hours on April 29.

That night Cao Van Khanh stayed at the operations room. After midnight, after listening to a report from the Intelligence Department, he phoned me. Then he sent a message to all commanders in the South informing them that at 0100 hours on April 30 the enemy had ordered their navy at Can Tho, Dong Tam and Phu Quoc to gather at a still unidentified place and a number of other ships (eight according to first reports) in order to prepare to sail for Guam. Earlier, 78 aircraft had been moved to Utapao base in Thailand. The message urged the field commanders to find out whether or not the ships were transporting troops.

Very early on the morning of April 30 Le Duan, Truong Chinh and Pham Van Dong were present at military headquarters. Vo Nguyen Giap was already there. The others in the Politburo and the Central Military Committee then arrived one by one.

After listening to Cao Van Khanh's report, the Politburo and Central Military Committee sent a message to the battlefield calling on all officers and men to overcome any difficulties and obstacles and strike with great determination to crush all enemy resistance. The message also urged them to maintain strict combat discipline, protect the lives and property of the population, and so on.

The message also urged regional military commanders to closely coordinate action with the Saigon battle to cause the disintegration of enemy forces in other areas, particularly in the Mekong River delta and on Poulo Condor and Phu Quoc Islands. It also called their attention to the need to preserve Tan Son Nhut airfield for other uses in the future. Two companies of pilots were made available at Phan Rang airport for the A37s. Squadrons of MIG aircraft were under orders to stand by for action at short notice.

At 1000 hours, Nguyen Thanh, head of Section 70 of the Intelligence Department assigned the task of monitoring news from the other side, quoted Japanese radio as saying that Liberation Army columns led by tanks were moving into Saigon.

Cao Van Khanh reported that a detachment of the 3rd Army Corps had received orders to move on the headquarters of the Saigon army's General Staff after capturing Tan Son Nhut airport, bypassing minor targets on the way.

The evacuation of Americans from Saigon, which had begun on the afternoon of April 29, had ended early on the morning of April 30 with the departure of US ambassador Martin from Saigon at 0445 hrs.

Latest reports said Division 10 from the 3rd Army Corps had reached the Bay Hien crossroads, and that units of the 1st Army Corps were taking on Lai Khe, Phu Loi and Lai Thoi bases and were moving in the direction of Go Sap. Another detachment was engaging the enemy in battle between Binh Phuoc and Binh Trieu bridges. After destroying enemy resistance at Ho Nai and Tam Hiep, the 4th Army Corps was taking on the command headquarters of Saigon's 3rd Army Corps, and was poised to launch its thrust into Saigon. A detachment from the 2nd Army Corps was cross-

ing the motorway bridge across the Dong Nai River. Pockets of enemy resistance at Thu Duc, north of Rach Chiec bridge, had been destroyed. In a south and southwesterly direction three advance units of Army 232 were closing in on the enemy's "pecial Sector and the headquarters of the Saigon police. On Highway 14 our men had occupied the Thu Thua military subsector and liberated the town of Tan An.

To prepare for the thrust by the main force into Saigon, between April 27 and 29 the special task force and commandos had occupied most major bridges and repulsed repeated enemy counter-attacks. Some bridges had changed hands two or even three times, including Rach Chiec and Binh Phuoc.

When the first units of the eastern detachment moved into Saigon from Tan Cang bridge, the population living on either side of the road came out en masse to cheer. Many Vietnamese and foreign journalists were there to take pictures or shoot films of this historic moment. To the north, the local army had liberated the district military headquarters in Chau Thanh and Di An and forced the enemy inside Song Than base to surrender.

Inside the city itself, the population in many areas under the direct leadership of the underground revolutionary movement and special task force had also risen up to dismantle the enemy's administrative apparatus. In Tay Nhi ward (now the 12th ward) of Phu Nhuan district, which lay next door to Saigon General Staff headquarters, someone had planted the revolutionary flag on top of the local administrative office at noon on April 29.

The General Staff had also received news from a number of provinces in the Mekong River delta. The local army in Tra Vinh on the afternoon of April 28 had already

regrouped one kilometre from the town and closed in on set targets such as the airport and enemy artillery emplacements. In Bac Lieu revolutionary forces sent an ultimatum to the provincial governor urging him to surrender. In Soc Trang the local army attacked the enemy in the town and at the airport and forced the surrender of the Khanh Hung military subsector.

Vo Nguyen Giap, on behalf of the Politburo and Central Military Committee, sent a message to the South with the following instructions:

1. The Military Administrative Committee must make public over the radio the first order by the revolutionary forces comprising the following points: that a/ the Liberation Army was entering Saigon-Gia Dinh to liberate the city and complete the liberation of South Vietnam; b/ the army of the Saigon regime must immediately put down its weapons and surrender; c/ the Saigon regime is to be dissolved at all levels; and d/ the population is called upon to rise up and join the Liberation Army in crushing all enemy resistance while ensuring protection for the lives and property of the people.

2. Air force preparations have been completed. Squadrons of MIG 17 and MIG 21 are ready to accomplish their mission if the need arises.

No sooner had the message been sent than the Intelligence Department heard over Western radio that the Liberation Army had entered the Presidential Palace in Saigon.

The Politburo sent another message to the South suggesting that we might use Duong Van Minh to call on enemy units to down their weapons, but not in his capacity as president, only as a politician who had crossed over to the ranks of the people.

We also received news that our men had planted the revolutionary flag on the top of the Independence Palace.

Seeing me in the courtyard of the headquarters, Phe, a man from the communications centre, gave me a bearhug and exclaimed in tears: "Complete victory! Complete! Complete! We have planted the flag on the top of the Independence Palace".

The corridor of the Central Military Committee was soon packed to capacity. Everyone was there from the highest general to the lowliest staff member. The members of the Politburo were overjoyed.

Although it was already known to almost everyone, news of the victory, officially announced over the loudspeaker, was greeted with loud applause. The news was immediately sent to the *Voice of Vietnam* and all information offices in Hanoi.

In the streets all movement suddenly came to a halt when the news was broadcast over the public address system. Then the crowd broke into spontaneous cheering.

It was already noon but Vo Nguyen Giap still lingered. He gathered the communications team together and treated them to beer, sweets and cigarettes as a "reward after many days of such intensive work", he said.

A little after 1300 hrs, the Politburo members came back to military headquarters. Before the afternoon meeting began the chief of Section 70 rushed in, bringing along a taped report from Saigon Radio on the unconditional surrender of the Saigon puppet president Duong Van Minh. The statement read:

" I, Duong Van Minh, president of the Saigon administration, call for the downing of weapons, unconditional surrender to the Liberation Army, dissolution of the ad-

ministrative structure from the centre to the localities, and the handing over of power to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam".

Then came a statement by a representative of the Liberation Army: "I, a representative of the Liberation Army, accept the surrender of ...".

After reading the report, Le Duan said:

"Check it to see that he said unconditional surrender. If not we have to make him say it again".

The chief of Section 70 re-read the report aloud. Duong Van Minh had said "unconditional surrender".

Half an hour later Tran Lam, director of the *Voice of Vietnam*, arrived with the same report. The Politburo asked him to make it clear to the people that we had won completely and that the enemy had surrendered unconditionally. Detailed reports should be given about the fight and uprising by the army and population in the Mekong River delta. The radio should direct the population in newly-liberated areas to help the Liberation Army track down fleeing enemy troops and call on remaining enemy troops and police to surrender.

At about 1600 hours two messages came at the same time, one from Le Duc Tho and the other from Pham Hung and Van Tien Dung written at 1330 hours on April 30. The messages dealt with Duong Van Minh's surrender and instruction from the front command to all units to pursue the enemy and call on them to surrender, collect their weapons and immediately attack and destroy any attempt at resistance by the enemy.

The instructions also provided for the arrest and assembly of all field commanders and high-ranking officers of the Saigon army to be sent to re-education camps.

Le Duan summed up the situation and made some suggestions for discussions at the forthcoming May 3 meeting of the Politburo and a later Central Committee one. Vo Nguyen Giap pointed to immediate tasks including liberation of our entire territory including offshore islands, and collection of all weapons and other enemy war materiel. There must be also a statement on the liberation of the Spratley Archipelago, Con Son, Phu Quoc, Thu Islands and others. Another urgent issue was the organisation of victory celebrations, to be held sometime between May 10 and 12, and no later.

As well as directions for our diplomatic activities, the Politburo discussed the general line for the development of the revolution after our victory. The Politburo noted that although some time was needed for preparation, the time was ripe for reunification of the country.

We stayed back with Vo Nguyen Giap. He added the following points to Le Duan's recommendations.

First, order and security must return to newly-liberated areas, especially the major towns; the setting up of a new administration must proceed together with the suppression of all counter-revolutionary acts, the arrest of ringleaders of reactionary organisations, and the safeguarding of people's lives and property. Second, a plan to deal with the remnants of the Saigon administration in the Mekong River delta and the islands of Con Son and Phu Quoc must be drawn up. In the liberation of the offshore islands special care should be provided for political prisoners detained there by the enemy.

Third, a plan must immediately be worked on for redeploying our forces following the complete liberation of the country as well as for making use of the huge quantity of war materiel captured from the enemy.

The following day, May 1, was International Workers Day. In the afternoon a grand meeting was held at the headquarters of the General Staff where, on behalf of the General Chief of Staff, I spoke of the significance of the great April 30 victory.

After the meeting, the General Staff adopted a full report on developments on the last day of the Ho Chi Minh campaign. The following are the main points. In the east, from 0500 hours a detachment from the 2nd Army Corps, supported and guided by a commando group, crossed the Dong Nai bridge in the direction of Saigon. After wiping out enemy resistance at the Thu Duc Officer Training Camp the advance detachment made contact with Battalion 81 of the special task force guarding Rach Chiec bridge, then made for the Saigon bridge (Tan Cang bridge had been captured by our special task force on April 29). After crushing enemy resistance at Thi Nghe bridge the advance detachment made straight for the Independence Palace under the guidance of a commando team. Meanwhile, other detachments from the same army corps quickly captured the radio, bank, the office of the puppet defence ministry and navy command, and the 4th district headquarters. The remaining forces of the 2nd Army Corps tracked down the enemy at Long Binh, occupied the town of Vung Tau and later sailed out to liberate Can Gio Island.

At 0800 hours, after routing the enemy at Ho Nai, the 7th Division entered Bien Hoa. As Cau Moi bridge across the Dong Nai River had been destroyed by the enemy and Ghenh bridge was not strong enough for tank traffic, our mechanized forces returned to the Bien Hoa-Saigon motorway in order to enter Saigon. At 1300 hours, our advance troops arrived at the Independence Palace and at 1630 hours had already captured all the set targets and taken over the

Independence Palace from the 2nd Army Corps. Brigade 52, which followed on the heels of the 7th Division, had already captured the headquarters of the Saigon Special Forces.

The remaining units of the 4th Army Corps continued their attack on the Bien Hoa military complex. The 6th Military captured the headquarters of the Saigon 3rd Military Sector, the headquarters of the Saigon 3rd Division and Bien Hoa airbase, while Division 341 captured Hoc Ba Thuc base and the towns of Bien Hoa and Thu Duc, then moved into the city.

In the north, on the morning of April 30, Division 320B of the 1st Army Corps received orders to speed up its advance. Arriving at Lai Thieu, the division followed Highway 13 and made straight for Binh Trieu bridge, forcing the whole of Saigon's 3rd Air Cavalry and 6th Armoured Regiment to capitulate (the latter were fleeing to Saigon), seizing 140 tanks and armoured cars. Regiment 48, using enemy vehicles, forced enemy soldiers to conduct it safely over Binh Trieu bridge and move straight to the headquarters of the Saigon army General Staff by following the Bach Dang-Chi Lang road. There they were informed by our special forces that that morning many Saigon generals and field commanders had fled but that the guards were still offering determined resistance. At 0900 hours a group of commandos disguised as Saigon troops captured the third gate and stormed the building of the General Staff. Another of our Special Forces teams captured the telecommunications centre, captured the colonel in charge together with 30 other officers, and ordered them under threat of death to preserve all the equipment. A third team, after failing to capture the second gate, went to the third where it met men from Regi-

ment 48, and together they attacked the main offices of the Saigon General Staff. By 1130 hours the entire headquarters of the General Staff was in the hands of the Liberation Army, with all equipment and documents intact.

On the outer perimeter Regiment 27 of Division 320B, in coordination with the local army of Binh Duong province, captured the training camp of the Saigon 5th Division and the Lai Thieu military subsector, and forced an enemy POW to lead the way to Binh Phuoc bridge (recaptured by our commandos at 0730 hours). After that they captured the command headquarters of the Saigon army's services and the Go Vap military subsector, and sent a detachment to join in the attack on the Independence Palace.

Meanwhile, Division 312 routed part of the 5th Division, attacked the Phu Loi camp, destroyed the enemy's main force at Binh Duong camp then took on the remainder of the puppet 5th Division, comprising 1,200 men and 36 vehicles then withdrawing from Lai Khe and Ben Cat to An Loi. Division 312 then stormed the Ben Cat military subsector and captured the entire enemy command. By then the town of Thu Dau Mot had also been liberated.

In the northwest, from 0600 hours a detachment from the 10th Division of the 3rd Army Corps attacked the enemy's 8th Paratroop Battalion and occupied the Bay Hien crossroads. Then it moved on to Lang Cha Ca and attacked Gate 5 at Tan Son Nhut airfield. But all three assaults by our forces were repulsed by intense enemy firepower. We had to call in 85 mm calibre artillery to destroy the enemy's anti-tank bunker in order to capture Gate 5 together with the command headquarters of the 5th Division of the Saigon air force and the airport communications centre. Meanwhile, another detachment from our 10th Division captured the

paratroop headquarters and contacted our military mission at "Camp David" (Tan Son Nhut airbase). At 1100 hours a third detachment stormed the headquarters of the air force command. By 1400 hours the whole of Tan Son Nhut airfield was in the hands of the Liberation Army.

While Regiment 24 was attacking the airbase, Regiment 28 from Division 10 was ordered to attack Saigon General Staff headquarters in conjunction with Regiment 48 and Division 320B. On its way there, Regiment 28 wiped out enemy paratroops still offering resistance. At 1100 hours the regiment's Battalion 3 had reached Gate 1 of the Saigon General Staff headquarters and together with men from Regiment 48, had occupied the building.

At the same time an infantry battalion from Regiment 64, spearheaded by tanks, moved on toward the Independence Palace.

In the west, from 0430 hours Regiment 1 from Division 9 of Army 232 attacked the enemy and occupied the Ba Queo crossroads, then proceeded to the Bay Hien crossroads. Defying enemy air bombardment, the regiment moved ahead along Le Van Duyet Street in the direction of the command headquarters of the Saigon special sector. There the regiment captured Saigon general Lam Van Phat, commander of the special sector. Two battalions were ordered to move on to the Independence Palace.

Meanwhile, Regiment 2 from Division 9 crossed the Bay Hien crossroads and proceeded to the Independence Palace along Phan Thanh Gian Boulevard. Seeing that the palace had been captured by our troops the regiment returned to the special sector headquarters, then spread out to capture different targets in Districts 2 and 10.

As for the 3rd Regiment, after liberating the Ba Hoa and Tan Tao area, it wiped out the enemy fleeing from Duc Hoa to Saigon, then went on to the Phu Tho hippodrome and forced the enemy to surrender, capturing 18 artillery pieces and more than 2,000 rifles.

In the south, from 0530 hours Regiment 24 (8th Military Zone) and special task force Regiment 429 routed the enemy at the Binh Hung Dong crossroads, captured the District 8 police station and Nhi Thien Duong bridge then moved to the Y-shaped bridge. By 1030 hours our troops had captured the general police headquarters. A detachment from Regiment 24 then moved on to the Independence Palace.

At the same time, Regiment 88, after crossing Ong Thin bridge and An Phu crossroads and occupying Highway 5, split into two to occupy navy headquarters, the port of Bach Dang and Nha Be military subsector.

On Highway 4, Division 5 from Detachment 232, after forcing the surrender of the whole of Saigon's Division 22, the 6th Combat Group of the enemy's special forces and a Combat Group of "civil guards", occupied Tan An and Thu Thua townships. The enemy at Tan An offered determined resistance from 1000 to 1200 hours. We captured nine artillery pieces and three armoured personnel carriers. Division 5 then decimated the enemy's Division 22 on Highway 22, capturing 10 armoured personnel carriers.

Thus, by noon on April 30 all the main targets, namely the Independence Palace, the enemy's General Staff headquarters, the headquarters of the "capital city" special sector, that of the Saigon police, and Tan Son Nhut airfield had fallen to the Liberation Army. Our men later spread out in different directions to occupy other enemy installations in the city. All units assigned with the task of entering Saigon sent a

detachment to support the main unit in the attack on the most important target – the "Independence" Palace.

By afternoon the whole of Saigon had come under the control of the Liberation Army. In close coordination with the Liberation Army, the popular masses inside the city, under the direction of the Saigon Party Committee, had undertaken a range of different activities. They acted as guides for the army and transported our troops on whatever means of transport were available, used loudspeakers to call on the enemy to surrender, not forgetting to exaggerate the size of attacking Liberation Army units, guided our troops in capturing Saigon army and police officers trying to escape, went to local enemy administrative offices and declared their dissolution and founded autonomous revolutionary administrations. Revolutionary flags appeared wherever Liberation Armed forces went.

In some places like the Khanh Hoi spinning mill, the workers and local people broke into warehouses and arms depots and took rifles to arm local self-defence forces. At others, people encircled the offices of the enemy's ward administrations and called on the enemy to surrender, including Binh Tay ward, the 6th district in Cho Lon, Tran Quang Khai ward in the 1st district, Ben Thanh ward in the 2nd district, and Truong Minh Giang ward.

Political prisoners detained by the enemy at Chi Hoa prison in the 10th district broke out of gaol and went out to call on the local population to take power into their own hands. When the Liberation Army arrived together with the people they occupied the weapons store, Army Hospital 115 and the Tran Nguyen Han army camp.

In strict implementation of instructions from the Saigon Party Committee and the Uprising Committee, workers and employees in most factories quickly occupied workshops to

prevent enemy agents from wrecking or removing equipment, materials and documents. In particular, workers at the Thu Duc power and water supply plants assured an almost continuous supply of electricity and water on the day and night of April 30 (there were only two hours of interruption). On the whole, during April 29 and 30, of a total of 160 wards inside Saigon, about 60 had overthrown the puppet administration before the arrival of the Liberation Army. The remaining 100 wards simply disintegrated once the Liberation Army arrived.

In the Mekong River delta, from the date of issue of Resolution 15 by the Party Central Committee for the South (known as COSVN by the Americans) up till April 30, local party organisations had recruited 36,000 more people into militia, self-defence and guerrilla forces in addition to nearly 14,000 men for the regular army, helping create another 30 battalions of the local army.

Highway 4, the last lifeline of the enemy linking Saigon to the Mekong River delta, was completely cut off. The enemy in the delta not only could not support their beleaguered forces in Saigon but also were helpless before the popular uprising.

With the enemy's 4th Military Sector completely cut off from Saigon, news of Duong Van Minh's unconditional surrender caused further disarray among the enemy in the delta. Local party organisations, capitalizing on the situation, organised the masses to arm themselves and rise up to overthrow the puppet administration.

On the whole, the offensive and general uprising of the population in the Mekong River delta can be categorised as follows.

First, it was a combination of military attack with on-the-spot mass uprisings as in Tra Vinh, Soc Trang and Vi Thanh. While the local armed forces attacked and occupied targets in the town the masses rose up and encircled the enemy and forced them to withdraw from their military posts. The families of puppet troops also went out to call on their husbands and sons to put down their weapons and go over to the revolution, thus isolating their officers. When the Saigon government surrendered, the masses stormed into the residence of the provincial governor and forced him to surrender while the local armed forces and political forces also called on the "civil guard" to give up resisting. In some places like the town of Soc Trang, the enemy's local armed forces did not give up even after the Saigon government had surrendered. Our armed forces had to use artillery to bombard enemy targets and capture armoured personnel carriers in order to storm the provincial governor's residence.

Secondly, the population rose up to destroy the enemy's ruling apparatus even before our armed forces entered a town. This happened in Can Tho, My Tho, Rach Gia, Vinh Long, Ben Tre, Sa Dec and Go Cong. In Can Tho, after learning that the enemy had surrendered in Saigon, the party committee led the population in rising up and breaking into prisons to liberate political prisoners. Meanwhile, the population turned out into the streets and captured the radio station and helped the Liberation Army to enter the city from various directions. In Vinh Long, the enemy also offered fierce resistance. Our armed forces had to fight a street battle before the provincial governor capitulated.

Thirdly, agitation among enemy ranks combined with mass uprisings compelled the enemy to surrender before the arrival of the Liberation Army as was the case in Bac Lieu

and Chau Doc. We sent a messenger to meet the puppet provincial governor. Then we drove in his own car, flying the flag of the National Liberation Front, into his residence where tens of thousands of people had massed earlier. The provincial governor declared his surrender to the revolution. In this way none of our six battalions in Bac Lieu was used during the seizure of power in this provincial town.

Through armed offensive and mass uprising the population of the Mekong River delta completely liberated the Mekong delta including Con Son and Phu Quoc Islands – almost without bloodshed.

The Standing Office of the Central Military Committee met on May 2 to study a wrap-up report. The meeting gave the following instructions about post-liberation tasks.

In re-establishing order and security in newly-liberated areas, it was necessary first of all to track down and capture all remnants of the enemy army and administration who refused to give up and were trying to dodge re-education. Particularly with regard to FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races) – the reactionary organisation set up by the French and later funded by the Americans to oppose the Vietnamese revolution in the Central Highlands – it was necessary to capture or eliminate the ringleaders and call on the rank and file to return to their families.

The collection and classification of military equipment captured from the enemy was also an urgent and difficult task which required careful planning by the General Staff in combination with various departments so that they might be inventoried for use by different units and localities.

The instructions also dealt with the need to work out a plan for the redeployment of the armed forces in the South.

The plan should see to it that the armed forces would not be concentrated in the towns but would be pulled out to defend the countryside and offshore islands as well. Some should be withdrawn to the North. In any case, military discipline should be strictly observed in newly-liberated areas so as not to harm the reputation of the revolutionary army.

With regard to personnel from the former Saigon army and administration, a sensitive plan had to be worked out for reeducating them so that they might rejoin their families and society as good citizens of a new society.

The meeting also discussed immediate tasks such as the celebration of victory in both parts of the country, and the summing up of the experience gained in leading the resistance against the US, particularly the Ho Chi Minh military campaign.

.....

President Ho Chi Minh's prediction thus became a reality. He had said :

"If the entire people are united in the struggle, within 15 years at the longest our motherland will be reunified and North and South will come under the same roof again."

NOTES

¹B1: 5th Zone (or 5th Military Zone).

B2: South Vietnam proper (east, central and south-western Vietnam).

B3: The Central Highlands of Vietnam (Pleiku, Darlac and Kontum provinces).

B4: Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces.

B5: South of Highway 9 and northern Quang Tri.

Military Zones:

- 1st Military Zone: northern forested provinces.

- 2nd Military Zone: the northwest.

- 3rd Military Zone: the Red River delta.

- 4th Military Zone: Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh provinces and the Vinh Linh district of Quang Tri.

- 5th Military Zone: Quang Nam, Danang, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen provinces.

- 6th Military Zone: southernmost provinces of central Vietnam – Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan and Lam Dong.

- 7th Military Zone: eastern South Vietnam where Resistance Zone D and the Duong Minh Chau Resistance Zone in the U Minh forests were located.

- 8th Military Zone: central part of South Vietnam – Long An, Dong Thap, My Tho, Kien Tuong provinces.

- 9th Military Zone: western South Vietnam – Vinh Long, Can Tho, Tra Vinh, An Giang, Chau Doc provinces

- Saigon - Gia Dinh Military Zone.

² Le Duc Tho, Politburo member of the Workers' Party of Vietnam (now the Communist Party of Vietnam), head of the Organizing Committee of the Party Central Committee, ad-

visor to the government delegation from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at the Paris Conference.

³ Le Duan, Politburo member of the Workers' Party of Vietnam, First Secretary of the Party Central Committee.

⁴ Vo Nguyen Giap, Politburo member, General, Minister for National Defence, Secretary of the Central Military Committee, Commander-in-Chief of the People's Army of Vietnam.

⁵ Before pulling out the US had introduced into South Vietnam nearly 700 aircraft, 500 artillery pieces, and 400 tanks and armoured cars together with a number of warships. It planned to bring in a much larger quantity of war materiel for the Saigon army, estimated at two million tonnes.

⁶ Central Military Department for South Vietnam (COSVN) Southern Command.

⁷ Tran Van Tra, commander of the B2 battlefront.

⁸ The 6th Zone (also called B6) comprises the southernmost provinces of central Vietnam.

⁹ The three prongs of attack – military and political attack and agitation among enemy ranks.

¹⁰ Nguyen Huu Tho, President of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the South Vietnam National Liberation Front, Huynh Tan Phat, Chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

- Tran Buu Kiem, Foreign Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

- Tran Do, deputy political commissar of the Southern Vietnam Military Command.

¹¹ Pham Hung, Politburo member and Secretary of COSVN.

¹² Kratie and Stungtreng in northeastern Cambodia bordering on Vietnam.

¹³ Dong Si Nguyen, Commander of Army 559, also known as the Truong Son or Quang Trung Army.

¹⁴ The Nguyen Hue campaign – an offensive against enemy forces based in Loc Ninh, Binh Long and along Highway 13 in 1972.

¹⁵ The tactical zones south of the demilitarized zone as defined by the Saigon regime were:

- 1st Military Zone (1st Tactical Zone) from Quang Tri to Quang Ngai.

- 2nd Military Zone (2nd Tactical Zone): Binh Dinh-Khanh Hoa, Binh Thuan and the Central Highlands.

- 3rd Military Zone (3rd Tactical Zone): the provinces of eastern South Vietnam.

- 4th Military Zone (4th Tactical Zone): the provinces in the Mekong River delta.

- Saigon and its outskirts were a "special capital city zone".

¹⁶ Le Trong Tan, Deputy General Chief-of-Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam.

¹⁷ The three political forces:

1. The Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam and the South Vietnam Liberation Front.

2. The pro-US Nguyen Van Thieu administration.

3. The neutral force made up mostly of intellectuals represented by Lawyer Trinh Dinh Thao. It demanded democratic freedoms in areas controlled by the Saigon government.

¹⁸ The US "flexible response" strategy as conceived in the Kennedy doctrine applied in South Vietnam from 1961 to 1969.

¹⁹ Song Hao, Head of the General Political Department of the People's Army of Vietnam.

²⁰ U Minh: the second largest submerged forest in the world, covering part of Kien Giang and Minh Hai provinces. It was a resistance base for the South Vietnamese revolution

during both wars of resistance against the French and the Americans.

²¹ Central Organizing Group – founded in March 1974 with the aim of helping the Central Committee and General Staff study strategy and tactics for the liberation of Saigon. The group was headed by Cao Van Khanh, Deputy General Chief-of-Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam.

²² The three strategic zones – the mountain and forest areas, plains and urban areas.

²³ The three revolutionary currents:

- the socialist revolution and socialist construction in the countries of the socialist camp.

- the struggle for the working class and working people in capitalist countries aimed at overthrowing capitalism and building socialism.

- the struggle of the people in the colonial and semi-dependent countries to drive out the imperialist aggressors and their puppets, liberate their nations and build socialism.

²⁴ Long Binh General Store – the biggest US logistics base in South Vietnam.

²⁵ Cam Ranh in Khanh Hoa province, the biggest naval base of the US and Saigon army.

²⁶ The Truong Sa Archipelago and Song Tu Tay Island – by April 29, 1975 the Liberation Army had captured all the islands occupied earlier by the Saigon army in the Truong Sa Archipelago such as Nam Yet, Son Ca, Sinh Ton and An Bang.

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● *The command
of the Ho Chi
Minh Campaign*



● *The Ho Chi
Minh Trail*



- *Fighting around the ancient citadel of Quang Tri*
- *Overrunning enemy post.*

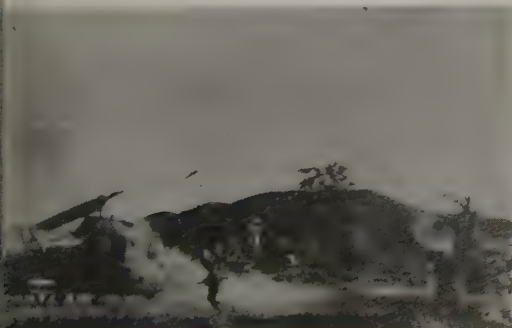
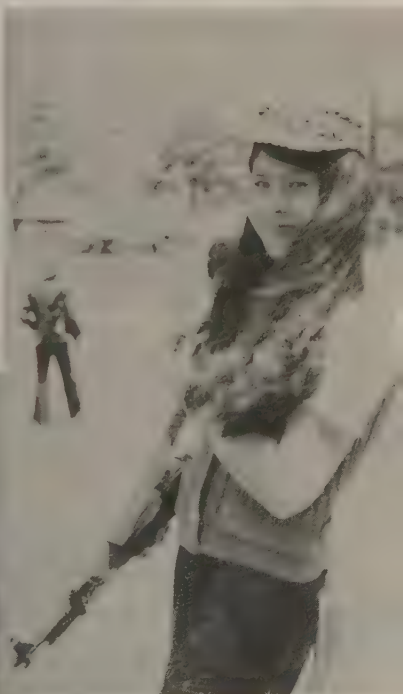




- *Fighters of the Khe Sanh Battalion making camouflage before starting to advance toward Saigon.*

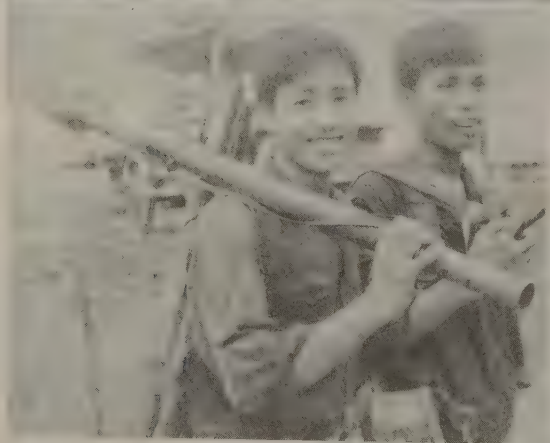
- *Militiawomen of the town of Da Lat.* ►

- *Dac To - Tan Canh liberated*





● *Taking enemy's stronghold.*



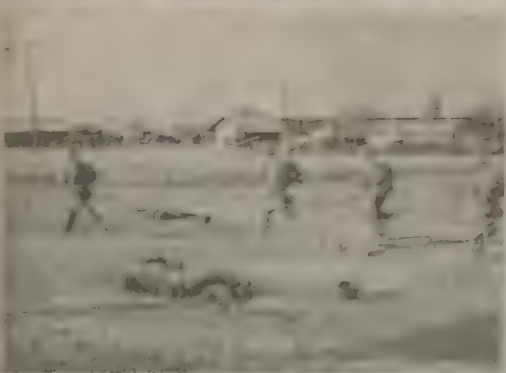
● *Commandoes of Unit 32 of the Special Task Force.*



● *Leading the way on the battlefield.*



● *Long-haired militiawomen in Ben Tre province.*



● *Crossing the marshy land of Dong Thap Muoi*

▲
● *Taking Military School for Armoured Cars at Nuoc Trong stronghold (Bien Hoa province)*





- *Battalion 44 carrying goods to the liberated areas.*
- *Fighters of Ca Mau province liberating the provincial capital*



● *Taking Tan Son Nhat Airport.*



▶ *US Military advisors running helter-sketter*

Tanks of the Liberation Army racing towards the Independence Palace.





● *Revolutionaries coming back home from Poulo Condor*



● *Reunion.*



AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

- Real name : Hoang Van Xiem; born in 1915 into a peasant family of Thai Binh province. Died in 1986 in Hanoi. '
- One of the founders of the Vietnam Propaganda Unit. (the present-day People's Army of Vietnam)
- Dec. 1944 - Oct. 1945 : Chief of Staff. Member of the Zone Military Committee under the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party.
- 1945-54 : Chief of Staff.
- 1954 : Vice-Minister of the National Defence and Deputy Chief of Staff.
- 1966 : Command and Commissar of the 5th Military Zone.
- 1967 : Commander of the 5th Military Command of South Vietnam.
- 1975 : Deputy Chief of Staff and Vice-Minister of National Defence.